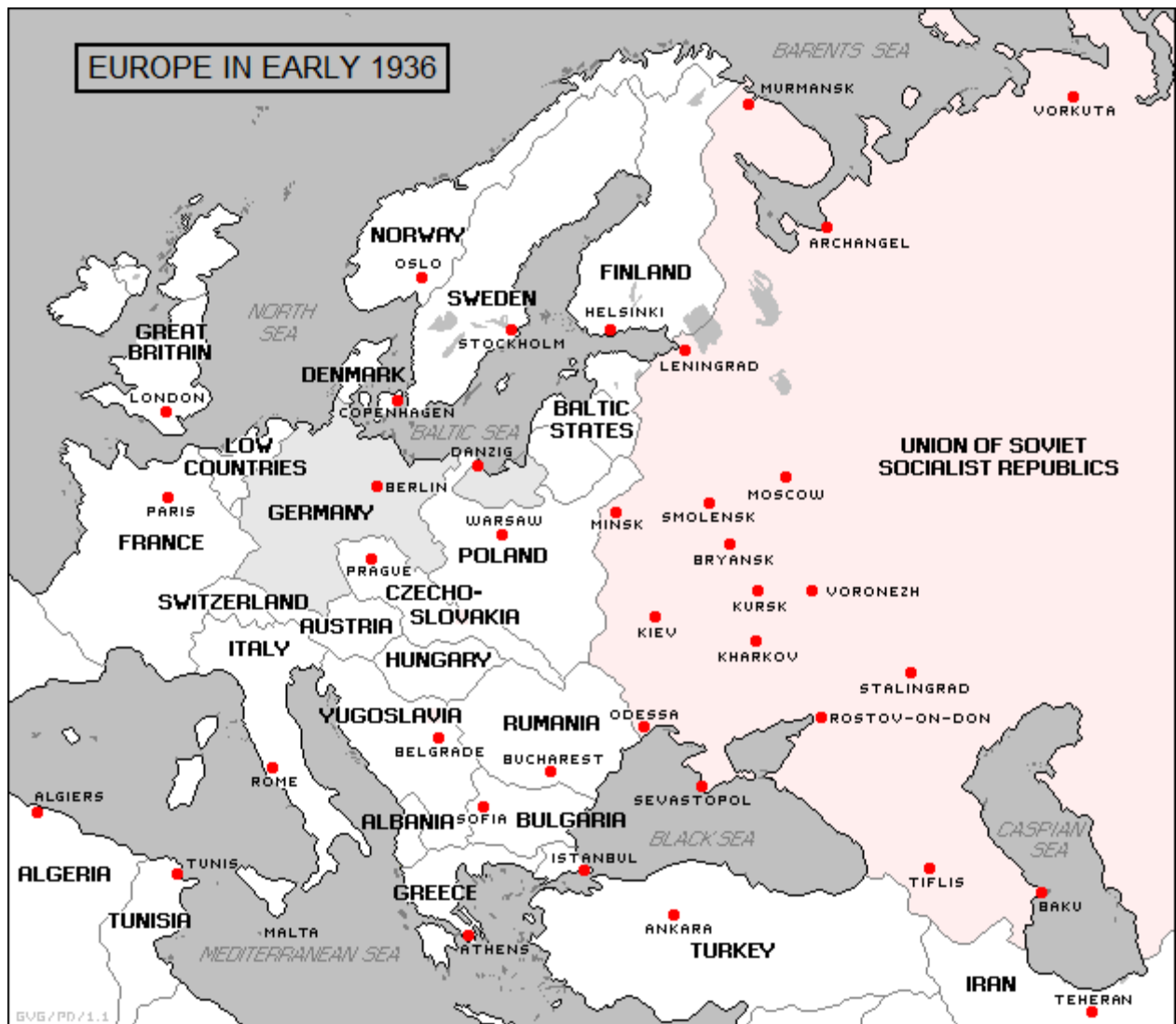


[1.0] Stalin's Terror

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* The Nazi-Soviet conflict was rooted in the rise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) under Josef Stalin as a threat to Europe. Stalin had not appeared to be a natural leader in the early days of the Soviet regime, but a combination of deviousness, ruthlessness, and a complete lack of ethics brought him to the top. From his position at the tip of the pyramid, Stalin created a society rooted in terror and oppression.



[1.1] THE RISE OF JOSEF STALIN

* The name of Josef Stalin is recognized by all as arguably the most powerful, successful, and brutal tyrant of the 20th century, but his origins hardly hinted at what he would become.

Although Stalin's life is carpeted with layers of half-truths, myths, and lies, he is believed to have been born in Gori, Georgia, then part of the Tsarist Russian empire, on 21 December 1879, which by the "old calendar" then in use was 9 December 1879. He was the only surviving child of Vissarion and Yekaterina Dzugashvili, a cobbler and housecleaner. What kind of an upbringing it was is unclear. The family was without doubt poor, but though some believe that Vissarion Dzugashvili was a drunken and brutal father, there is no strong evidence that he was any rougher than was the norm for his place in society, and his son never made much of any childhood problems. It is known that Josef was raised speaking Georgian and did not learn Russian, a much different language, until he was about 8 or 9. He would speak Russian with a strong Georgian accent to the end of his days, long after he had turned his back on all things Georgian.

The young Josef Dzugashvili demonstrated a youthful bent towards theological studies. He excelled at his efforts, and in 1894 won a scholarship to attend a seminary in Tiflis, now Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, where he worked to become an Eastern Orthodox minister. He came of age there, becoming a young man described as strong, with big hands, but short, only about 162 centimeters (5 feet 4 inches) tall. He would always be self-conscious about his height, later in his prime wearing platform shoes, ensuring that he had a wooden step to stand on when he gave speeches, and making very sure that official photographs did nothing to suggest his short stature. His left arm was stiff and shorter than his right, the result of a childhood injury, and his face was pocked with smallpox scars, the result of a near-fatal childhood struggle with the disease.

His coming of age in Tiflis was not merely physical but intellectual. Once in the big city, he was exposed to radical ideas popular among the student community that were hardly heard of in Gori. As if to push him in that direction, the seminary's rules were strict and absurdly hidebound, even going so far as to ban the reading of "subversive" literature by the likes of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky; students who were seen as suspicious were spied on and harassed mercilessly. It was not a mindset that instilled respect of authority. He gradually discarded his Christianity in favor of a more modern religion: Marxism.

* Josef Dzugashvili almost ready to graduate from the seminary when he was expelled in 1899. He gravitated towards the life of a professional revolutionary, holding down various jobs while he spread the gospel of Karl Marx among the Georgian proletariat. The Tsarist police had little patience for his activities and arrested him in April 1902. After stints in jail in Georgia, he was exiled to Siberia in July 1903. Tsarist exile in Siberia might have sounded harsh, but it was, particularly in comparison with later standards, easy-going and not very strict. He escaped and returned to Georgia in early 1904.

In 1903, the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party had split into two factions, the "Mensheviks" and the "Bolsheviks". The Bolsheviks were the more extreme group, led by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, who had taken the name of "Lenin". Although Dzugashvili played no significant role in the Russian 1905 Revolution, he met Lenin late in that year, and gradually became a hardcore Bolshevik. He may have participated in a number of heists intended to provide funding for the party, but like so much of Stalin's life the facts are unclear.

Dzugashvili married a Georgian woman named Yekaterina Svanide that same year, 1905. Not much is known about the marriage other than that she bore him a son, Yakov, in 1907, and then died later that year. Yakov went into the care of his maternal grandparents while his father continued his work for the Bolsheviks, to be arrested again in 1908 and sentenced to exile in Siberia for a second time. He escaped once more in 1909, to be arrested and exiled for a third time in 1910, serving out the remainder of his sentence and being released in June 1911. Under the terms of his parole, he was not allowed to go to Saint Petersburg, Moscow, or the Caucasus, but he went to Saint Petersburg anyway. The Tsarist police arrested him for a fourth time in late 1911 and packed him off to Siberia again.

In 1912, while Dzugashvili was in exile in Siberia, Lenin, then in Prague, formally split his Bolsheviks off from the Mensheviks and formed a party Central Committee. Although Lenin had misgivings about Dzugashvili, finding him crude, quarrelsome, and overbearing, the Bolsheviks were not doing well at the time, and Dzugashvili had undoubted drive and ability. Lenin made him a member of the Central Committee. Dzugashvili was pleased with the news, and celebrated his promotion by escaping in March 1912 and traveling to Saint Petersburg. He was arrested in May 1912 and shipped back to Siberia for a fifth time. He escaped again during the summer.

Dzugashvili had been known for some time by his colleagues in the revolutionary movement as "Koba", meaning "the Boss", in honor or derision of his bossy ways. Some sources claim this nickname went back to his childhood. He had also used a number of pseudonyms in his writings in revolutionary newspapers, including "Stalin", meaning "Steel". Over the next few years, he would become so fond of this name that it would become the name everyone knew him by. "Dzugashvili", after all, was something of a mouthful. Even in 1915 Lenin had to ask a colleague to "find out the name of Koba -- Josef D. ... We have forgotten it."

Stalin went to Vienna in 1913, only to be arrested on his return in March, and shipped off, for the sixth and last time, to Siberia, to a very remote town from which escape was difficult. He adjusted to the relaxed life in exile. He had a remarkable freedom of movement, even going to regional meetings of Marxists. He apparently had an affair with a local woman and fathered a bastard, though once again details are lacking. After Russia went to war with the Central Powers in 1914, Stalin had to submit to a medical examination to determine if he should be drafted into the Tsar's army, but he was rejected on account of his bad arm and other defects.

In March 1917 (February by the old calendar), the government of Tsar Nicholas II was overthrown, leading to a chaotic period in which factions fought for power. Stalin and other Marxist exiles went to Petrograd (previously Saint Petersburg, later Leningrad; in the present day Saint Petersburg again), where he became a staff member for the party newspaper, "Pravda (Truth)".

In November 1917 (October in the old calendar), the Bolsheviks seized control. Lenin knew that his new Bolshevik state would not survive if the Central Powers continued their war in the East, so he pushed for a peace agreement at almost any price, signing the treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, which ceded control of vast areas of what had been eastern Imperial Russia, from Finland to the Ukraine, to the Central Powers. The Central Powers were forced to sue for peace in the fall of that year and the treaty would be repudiated, though the rearrangement of the map of Eastern Europe meant that lands such as Poland and Finland would become independent.

The end of World War I did not mean peace in Russia. A full-blown civil war broke out in the summer of 1918, with Bolshevik "Red" forces grappling with larger but more poorly organized reactionary "White" forces. It was a dirty sort of war, with each side striving to outmatch the other in ruthlessness and brutality. Despite the fact that the Whites were supported by Britain and, to a lesser extent, the United States, and time after time the Reds found themselves hanging by a thread, the thread held, and by November 1920, they had overcome the Whites.

Although Stalin would later play up his role in the Bolshevik Revolution, his contribution was minor at best, and as some historians have pointed out, his life as a revolutionary was mostly noted by being arrested. Furthermore, revolution had been his sole career; he had absolutely no other marketable skills. However, the civil war brought his star to the top. At the beginning of the conflict, he was sent south to Volgograd (previously named Tsaritsyn and later Stalingrad) to coordinate the supply of food for the region. This was his first major operational assignment for the Bolshevik regime. However, with the approach of White forces, he took on a military role, appointing a long-time revolutionary colleague, Kliment Voroshilov, to command forces on the front.

In principle, the entire Red Army was under command of Lev Bronstein -- better known as Leon Trotsky, Trotsky having been the name of one of his jailers -- and Voroshilov was supposed to take orders from him. In practice Stalin would receive orders from Trotsky and scribble on them: TO BE IGNORED -- before passing them on to Voroshilov. Stalin was playing cagey and Trotsky blamed Voroshilov for failing to follow his orders, but when Trotsky sent an officer south to take charge, both Stalin and Voroshilov simply refused to obey. This insubordination led to a political feud, with Trotsky going so far as to consider sending Red Army forces south to impose his will. Stalin was finally recalled to Moscow in October 1918.

However, Lenin had been impressed by Stalin's decisiveness, take-charge attitude, and ruthlessness in the south. That outweighed Stalin's insubordination, and even the fact that Stalin had done an unimpressive job of it: the Reds outnumbered the Whites on the front, and Lenin commented that Stalin had racked up tens of thousands of unnecessary casualties. Still, the Bolsheviks lacked people with any leadership ability, and during the rest of the civil war Stalin was sent to one front after another to deal with emergencies.

Stalin got things done, and if his methods were inclined to be brutal and cruel, that was not a problem as far as Lenin was concerned. In fact, it even seemed admirable. If Stalin's solutions were not always tidy and brilliant, they were still solutions. Lenin did find Stalin exasperating -- in his reports to Moscow, Stalin portrayed himself as a military genius -- but Lenin remained confident in him. In contrast, the antagonism between Trotsky and Stalin continued to grow.

The civil war led to social breakdown and a massive famine in 1921, in which millions of people starved to death. Many more would have died had it not been for the American Relief Administration, managed with great effectiveness by Herbert Hoover, later a US president. Stalin was tasked with working on famine relief on the Soviet side, but much of his activity along that line focused on doing what he could to frustrate the relief effort. The Americans were counter-revolutionaries, after all, and could be up to no good. When the relief effort ended, Stalin arrested Soviet officials who had worked with the Americans and would have had them shot, but was forced to bend to loud objections from Hoover and others.

The famous Red reporter John Reed met Stalin not long before Reed's death in 1920. Reed's observations on Stalin were at least half astute: "He's not an intellectual like the other people you will meet. He's not even particularly well-informed, but he knows what he wants. He's got will-power, and he's going to be on the top of the pile one of these days." In April 1922, Lenin appointed Stalin as Chairman of the Central Committee.

* During the time of civil war, in 1918 Stalin married again, a teenager named Nadezhda Alliluyeva, his personal secretary. He had known her since she was little, since she was the daughter of a fellow revolutionary, Sergei Alliluyeva. A picture of her at 13 shows a very pretty little girl, with dark eyes, and dark hair tied with a ribbon. She was raised as a good revolutionary and, young and naive, was taken with Stalin, who was strong-willed, committed to the cause, and on the rise. She would not be the last person to be naive about Stalin.

[1.2] THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER

* In May 1922, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin suffered the first in a series of strokes, a process that ended in his death on 21 January 1924. At his death, the USSR was a land of 200 million people that covered a sixth of the surface of the Earth. The Soviet people had endured a world war, revolution, and a civil war. With Lenin gone, they faced a transition to new leadership.

Joseph Stalin was delighted to hear of Lenin's death. Stalin's secretary said: "I never saw him in a happier mood." Relations between Lenin and Stalin had been going downhill for some time, and it is likely that if Lenin had lived longer and been in better health, Stalin would have found himself demoted or cast out of the government's inner circle. Luck had intervened, and now Stalin and Leon Trotsky were the front-runners to take charge of the Revolution.

Lenin had written a document stating recommendations for a successor, and discussed the merits and faults of both Stalin and Trotsky. In a postscript, however, he emphasized Stalin's faults, and suggested that Stalin be removed from the post of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR and be replaced by another who was "more loyal, more courteous, and more considerate of comrades, less capricious, etc." Although Lenin's widow Krupskaya tried to make the document public, infighting in the inner circles of the Communist Party leadership conspired to suppress it. It was only shown to a select few during the 13th Party Congress, and the readers were sworn to secrecy. Josef Stalin was now on track towards supreme authority over the USSR.

By 1928, Stalin had succeeded in getting ahead of potential competitors for power in the Party. Old comrades and rivals Kamenev and Zinoviev had unwisely joined forces with him to send

Trotsky into exile, only to be then sidelined. Bukharin, one of the intellectual founders of the Revolution, was forced to make a public confession of his errors. Those who were useful to Stalin and did not seem inclined to challenge his authority, such as Vyacheslav Skyrabin, an old Politburo colleague who had taken the name of "Molotov (Hammer)", and Anastas Mikoyan, would be content to ride on Stalin's coattails, though they would eventually learn it was a very hazardous means of transportation: Stalin would send members of both Molotov's and Mikoyan's families to prison.

There were other power centers, such as the military, that existed outside the Party. To gain control of them, Stalin needed to extend the reach of the Party over every aspect of Soviet life. Once under such central control, the entire nation would be geared to serve Stalin's ambitions, and then Soviet power could be extended beyond its borders. Of course, such ambitions could be ideologically painted with the belief that in the struggle between Communism and Capitalism, the historical dialectic dictated that Communism would prevail. However, underneath all the Communist doubletalk, Stalin simply wanted power and would stop at nothing to get it.

Stalin was not the only leader with ambitions beyond the borders of his homeland. By this time, Mussolini had made Italy a Fascist state; the Japanese were looking towards expansion into their weak Chinese neighbor; and in Germany Adolf Hitler's National Socialist (Nazi) Party was becoming a political power to be reckoned with.

* At the end of the 1920s, 98% of the land of the USSR and the nation's food supply was in the hands of the peasantry. To begin his consolidation of power, Stalin had to bring the peasantry under control. Lenin had tried to do this and been forced to back off, since in response to the state seizure of their property the peasants had simply killed their livestock and destroyed their grain stocks, helping bring on the famine of 1921.

Stalin intended to succeed, whatever the cost, where Lenin had failed. He initiated a program of forced collectivisation, essentially dispossessing the peasantry and reducing them to servitude. This was a far-reaching and brutal measure in a country that was mostly agrarian, the opening shot of Stalin's war on the Soviet Union's own citizens. Stalin knew that the action would cause great economic dislocation, but he was willing to pay that price to get the control he demanded. The suffering that it would cause was a matter of no concern to him, nor was the fact that the collectivisation effort would set Soviet agriculture back for generations.

Forced collectivisation would lead to the starvation of millions, to the imprisonment of millions more. Hundreds of thousands would be simply murdered in hidden courtyards, after confessions extracted by torture and contemptible sham trials. Stalin encouraged a bizarre class struggle, creating a group of "rich peasants" named "kulaks" and labeling them as oppressors, which simply set the very poorest peasants against those who, say, had an extra cow or the like. The big landowners had been driven off or otherwise dealt with and so the war against the kulaks was almost a complete fraud, a way of terrorizing *all* the peasants and shrewdly using petty envy as a weapon in the terror.

The Soviet propaganda machine managed to maintain the USSR's image in the West as a progressive country. Western intellectuals in particular would be taken in and proclaim the

USSR the wave of the future. Conveniently, in 1928, the famed Russian writer Maxim Gorky returned to the USSR after living in Italy for a number of years. Gorky regarded the peasantry as subhuman, and he would prove useful to Stalin by writing propaganda to support the wave of brutality against the kulaks that was to sweep the country. Gorky would eventually outlive his usefulness. His abrupt death in 1936 is suspected to have been at Stalin's orders.

By the end of 1929, forced collectivisation was in full force in the Ukraine and the northern Caucasus. Arrests were made in a million households, with fathers sent off to new forced-labor camps and the families deported to Siberia. The first wave swept off the more prosperous level of the peasantry. In the winter of 1930, the sweep went lower, scything through the poorer peasantry. 120 million people in 600,000 communities were confronted with expropriation, eviction, and transportation. An internal passport system kept the movements of the peasantry under control. They would go where Stalin wanted them to go and nowhere else.

The terror was carried out by special food detachments, recruited from young men from the towns who had few attachments to the peasantry, and the increasingly powerful security apparatus, then known as the "OGPU", originally Lenin's "Cheka". There were many small uprisings, all of which were brutally crushed. A million peasants died of starvation in the north Caucasus. Five million died in the Ukraine when their grain disappeared into the Soviet apparatus. Villages became ghost towns. Three million men went into the network of prison camps that was at first known by the acronym "STON" (which translates literally into English as "Moan") and would later become known as the "Gulag". There they would work on everything from canals to power plants to the Moscow subway, building a new Soviet state on their blood and bones.

Most would be worked to death within a few months of their arrival, reduced to "camp dust", as the saying had it. Stalin needed prisoner labor to achieve his goals. There was no need to worry about their well-being. Calculations were performed to show that it was more economically cost-effective to work prisoners to death over a few months on a starvation diet than to keep them alive. Those that survived would usually be broken for the rest of their lives, their health ruined and their heads full of a disorderly jumble of realities and fantasies: when realities are more terrible than nightmares, it becomes impossible to tell the two apart. As for those who died in endless ranks, there were still many more where they came from, and if the ones that fell were also people who were suspected of not being completely obedient, so much the better.

* In March 1930, Stalin published an article on collectivisation, praising its success. In the meantime, he was looking for other means of extending his control over the Soviet state. In 1928, Stalin had instituted the first Soviet "Five-Year Plan", an aggressive program of industrialization and exploitation of the USSR's resources. Factories, dams, railroads, and mines were to be brought into being to fuel the growth of the Soviet state.

Such a major effort demanded strict control. The first sign of how that control would be achieved occurred when 55 miners were put on trial at Shakti, accused of conspiring with foreign powers to wreck the mines of the Donetz basin. 11 were sentenced to death and executed, the rest were sent off the prison camps from which few, if any, returned. Stalin proclaimed: "We have internal enemies, we have external enemies. This, comrades, must not be forgotten for a single moment."

If the Five Year Plans didn't meet their goals, someone would have to pay, and it would be "saboteurs" who conspired against the Soviet state. Ridiculous plots were fabricated and given substance with confessions squeezed out of helpless prisoners, who were then shipped off to the prison camps and worked to death. Outsiders saw their dazzling and great contributions to Soviet might, and knew nothing of the suffering and despair that had built them.

* As Stalin's power and authority rose, his marriage deteriorated. Nadezhda bore him a second son, Vasily, in 1921, and a daughter, Svetlana, in 1926. Vasily would eventually go by his father's family name of Stalin, while Svetlana would go by her mother's family name of Alliluyeva. Stalin's first son, Yakov, came to live with them, but although Yakov got along well with Nadezhda, his father disliked him. Those who knew Yakov described him as gentle and serene; his father was neither. He belittled Yakov continuously, and when the young man attempted suicide, Stalin could only say: "Hah! He couldn't even shoot straight!" Yakov then left the household, moving to Leningrad to live with his stepmother's family.

Svetlana was her father's favorite, and he wrote her endearing letters. However, Stalin was what he was, crude and coarse and bullying, and whatever affection there was between him and Nadezhda gradually faded out. Nadezhda fell into depressions and apathy. She went to live with her parents for a time and sought help from a neurologist. A picture of Nadezhda from 1932 shows her bundled up against the cold and snow in cap and long winter coat, still pretty but seeming burdened.

She shot and killed herself on the night of 8 November 1932. One contributing factor appears to have been an incident in which she reported to Stalin horror stories she had heard of the sufferings of the peasantry under the state's famine policies. She had been enlightened about this matter by fellow students at a textiles class she was taking; Stalin's reaction was to order the arrest the students. There had also been a scene between Stalin and Nadezhda that evening in which he had become abusive, and there are clues that she had heard Stalin was in the company of another woman.

There are suspicions that Stalin murdered her. Having no conscience to speak of he was certainly capable of it, but those around him reported later that he was deeply shaken and felt betrayed by her death. Stalin had no great interest in his children afterward. He never married again, though some suspect that an attractive woman servant in his household served him at night as well as during the day.

Such social contacts as he had degenerated into crude dinner and drinking sessions with his cronies, possibly best captured in spirit by the sordid drunken bashes of the revolutionary pigs in George Orwell's savage little satirical novel ANIMAL FARM. Stalin would toy with his guests at these functions. They went along with whatever he wanted them to do and pretended to be cheerful about it. Stalin would drink, but he was rarely as drunk as he pretended to be. He preferred to pressure others to drink and then see what they said when the booze had loosened their tongues.

[1.3] STALIN'S PURGES

* As Stalin turned the screws on internal enemies, real and imaginary, much more tangible external enemies began to arise. The Japanese had defeated and humiliated Russia in the Russo-Japanese war in 1905; in 1932 the Imperial Japanese Army invaded Manchuria without authorization by the Japanese government, setting up the puppet state of Manchukuo. Japanese troops now stood along a long border with the Soviet Union.

In January 1933, German elections swept the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler to victory. Hitler, and in his reflection the Nazi Party, was rabidly anti-Bolshevik, anti-Jew, and anti-Slav. Oddly, Hitler had no great ideological objection to Communism, and there were ex-Communists in the ranks of the Nazis who Hitler thought highly of because they possessed the inclination to violence and ruthlessness that he found so admirable. His problem with Communism was that he believed it was a Jewish conspiracy. By a further irony, the emerging Stalinist regime was antisemitic as well, though it was by no means as rabid about it as its German counterpart.

Furthermore, anyone who cared to read through the turgid prose of Hitler's autobiography, *MEIN KAMPF*, would see it flatly stated that Hitler believed that the German people should obtain "lebensraum (living space)" in the East, displacing the inferior Slavic peoples, who he called "a mass of born slaves", fit only to be "hewers of wood and drawers of water." Hitler made little secret of this ambition in his public speeches. The Soviets were perfectly aware of it, occasionally denouncing Hitler's expansionist goals in propaganda broadcasts.

A clash between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union was inevitable. However, Stalin quickly granted recognition to the new Nazi government. Three months after Hitler's election, Stalin ratified the extension of the 1926 Berlin Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality. Incomprehensibly, the Soviets continued to provide military assistance and training to German military, which would soon rise as a deadly threat to the USSR.

* Although Stalin was at the helm of the Party, he was still not as sure as he wanted to be of his absolute control, although at the Party Congress of 1934 he was showered with praise, particularly from Party risers like the Georgian Gregoriy Ordzhonikidze and Stalin's old pal Voroshilov. The "Congress of Victors", as the event was called, was a forum for rising, future, and fading stars of the Party. Lavrenti Beria, who would become most useful, was filmed at Stalin's side, while the movie camera caught a young Nikita Khrushchev in the rows, who would denounce Stalin's cruelties a quarter of a century later.

The real focus of the camera was on current Party heroes, many of whom Stalin regarded as rivals and so a threat. The most prominent of these heroes was the charismatic Sergei Kirov, who though capable of being ruthless was bright, energetic, ambitious, and what a later generation would call "telegenic". He was consensus-oriented, not inclined to iron-fisted leadership like Stalin's, and that made him attractive as a potential General Secretary for the Party.

Although the applause for Stalin at the Party Congress was loud and continuous, there was a core group of regional Party secretaries who knew about his brutal policies in detail and did not like them. Many public votes were taken during the congress, but on the last day a secret vote was

conducted to select members of the important Central Committee of the Communist Party and confirm Stalin as General Secretary of the Party. This was something of a formality, but it would have real effects. Only three votes were cast against Kirov for his position on the Central Committee, but 300 were cast against Stalin. The votes were immediately destroyed and false results were announced, electing Stalin nearly unanimously. Of 1,966 delegates, more than half would be executed sooner or later; historians have suggested that in hindsight the "Congress of Victims" might have been a more appropriate name than the "Congress of Victors". Of the 139-member Central Committee, 98 would be executed.

Kirov would get special treatment. Stalin took his cue from Adolf Hitler. Hitler had been helped to power by Ernst Roehm and his Brownshirt SA thugs, but once power had been achieved, Roehm became a rival and an inconvenience. Hitler moved against the SA in a swift stroke known as the "Night Of The Long Knives", and personally executed Roehm in a Munich cell. The neat operation was directed by Reinhard Heydrich, a rising star in Hitler's personal force, known as the "Schutzstaffel" or "SS", crystallizing around Heinrich Himmler.

Stalin found the Night of Long Knives inspirational, reputedly commenting: "Hitler, what a lad! Knows how to deal with political opponents!" However, Stalin's approach was a little more devious. Six months after the Night Of The Long Knives, on 1 December 1934, Kirov was assassinated by an OGPU agent named Leonid Nikolaev. Some sources suggest that Nikolaev had actually acted on his own and not on Stalin's orders, but if the murder was a spontaneous act, it was incredibly convenient for Stalin. When Bukharin was called on the phone and told of Kirov's murder, he put down the phone and said: "Now Koba will shoot us all."

Kirov's death was played up as a tragedy in the state propaganda apparatus and Stalin shed crocodile tears at his funeral, kissing the corpse on its cheeks. Arrests and executions began. Kirov's bodyguard hardly lived a day longer than his boss, being bludgeoned to death with iron bars in the back of a paddy wagon. Nikolaev had been a complete dupe in the whole thing and realized it, but he was shot before the end of December, along with his wife, ex-wife, sister-in-law, one brother, and a number of acquaintances, collectively described as the "Leningrad terrorist cell". Stalin was now showing his full true colors. The Party was to be cleansed of anyone that Stalin did not trust, and he was a very untrusting person.

Bukharin was perfectly correct as to his own fate. He himself was put through humiliating sham trials to be abused and browbeaten by the prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky, and executed in 1938.

The arrests, confessions under torture, trials, and executions had a strong impact on the public. Men who had been praised as Communist heroes were now revealed to be traitors, though the trials were an obvious farce to anyone who wasn't a complete drone. Jews were even accused of being Nazi agents. In all, before the purges were done, 1 in 20 Soviet subjects would be arrested. The result was predictably widespread confusion and fear. People began to spy on their neighbors and denounce them to the authorities, who gave little thought to the truth of such accusations. Anyone who had a petty grudge against a neighbor or co-worker now had an opportunity for the ultimate revenge, and many became enthusiastic in performing such denunciations. What little person would not have been thrilled to have the power of life and

death over enemies? There were some people who denounced hundreds of others, persisting in their denunciations so fanatically that even the authorities stopped listening to them.

Nobody dared speak freely. Sometimes things were so absurd that people could hardly keep from laughing, even though laughing was dangerous. In 1937 Stalin had proposed a new Soviet constitution, and put it before the people for a referendum. One Soviet citizen did his duty and went to vote, as he had to if he valued his head, and went into the voting booth to find the vote card had a single entry. It was already marked. He found it almost literally hysterical. A joke went around: "Barber, why must you talk politics?" "Because your hair is easier to cut when it stands on end."

Surprisingly, many Soviet citizens did not realize who was responsible for the madness, thinking it was due to some breakdown in the system or officials who had gone off the deep end. People would say: "If only Stalin knew!" Sometimes concerned citizens would even try to write Stalin with complaints, an action that was likely to prove a grave mistake. Stalin often scribbled comments on documents and letters that went across his desk; when he received pleas from citizens in desperate distress, he would scrawl mocking or contemptuous remarks on them -- and often order the arrest of the authors.

Leftist visitors from the West still believed that the Soviet Union represented progressive revolutionary ideals and the way of the future, and Stalin proved shrewd at manipulating them so that they went home completely ignorant of the true nature of Stalin's regime. Communist movements in other countries remained dupes. When a decree was passed that extended the death penalty down to 12-year-olds, French Communists argued that under Communism people matured so much faster that a 12-year-old was effectively an adult.

The privileged elite in the showpiece state apartments on the Moscow river were witnesses to the terror, as well as other acts of tyranny. The apartments faced the grand Church of Christ the Savior, one of Moscow's great landmarks, but in 1935 workmen began to put up fences and remove the church's artworks. Shocked rumors ran around that the church was to be demolished. The Chairman of the Economic Council, Valerian Kubishev, wrote a letter to Stalin pleading that the church be spared. Kubishev received the letter back, with Stalin's words scribbled across it: "Comrade Kubishev: You do not understand the full scale of the political meaning of this action. I insist on the demolition of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. J. Stalin."

And so the domes of the cathedral fell. It would be rebuilt decades later, but its destruction remained a crime. Kubishev was a brave man. He died not long afterward, apparently of natural causes, but there remains room for doubt.

* Stalin's brutality undermined the unity and morale of the Soviet people. In Germany, Hitler was proving similarly brutal, but somewhat shrewder. Hitler made the Jews a scapegoat for the country's problems, a measure that was both convenient and sincere, since his hatred of the Jews was pathological. Persecution of the Jews began to increase dramatically. At the same time, Hitler inflamed German patriotism and resentment against the defeat in World War I to rearm his country and steel the Germans for war. Germany would be turned into a powerful machine that would reach out and take the lebensraum in the East that was one of Hitler's most prized goals.

The German military, the Wehrmacht, had never paid any more concern to the limitations in the Treaty of Versailles than they had to, but now Hitler openly defied the treaty, beginning mass production of tanks for his army, the Heer; modernizing and building up his air force, the Luftwaffe; and implementing plans to build submarines and surface warships for his navy, the Kriegsmarine. In 1935, conscription began to build an army of 36 divisions, and the country was put on a war footing.

While the Nazi threat grew, Stalin worried about internal enemies. He was suspicious of the military and wanted it in his grasp. One of the most prominent of the military elite was Mikhail Tukachevsky, a handsome ex-Czarist officer of noble blood and excellent military credentials, who was Marshal of the Red Army. To Stalin, he stood too much for the loathsome old society. Tukachevsky, a big and strong man, had also apparently once grabbed the short-statured Stalin by the shoulders and lifted him up to face height. Stalin had a very long memory for personal grudges.

Tukachevsky had been an obedient tool of the Soviet state, and had suppressed uprisings and enforced Stalin's will. He also had proven an excellent and forward-looking officer, who introduced parachute assaults and conducted military experiments in armored warfare. That meant very little to Stalin, who received intelligence from Prague in the spring of 1937 that Tukachevsky was planning a coup. What Stalin did not know was that the intelligence was a fabrication, put together by the brilliant Reinhard Heydrich.

Heydrich's scheme gave Hitler a great military victory without a single German firing a shot. Stalin acted swiftly. Tukachevsky and a number of senior Army officers were arrested in May and put through trials that were a sham even by Stalinist standards. The generals were executed on the evening of 12 June 1937. The loss of Tukachevsky was a particular blow to the Red Army.

That was only the beginning. The purge cut through the military senior command hierarchy like a scythe, and it didn't stop there, working its way down the ranks to clean out thousands, tens of thousands, of junior officers as well. Stalin's old crony Voroshilov boasted to the Great Leader: "The Red Army has been cleansed of more than 40,000 officers!"

The majority of the purged officers were simply dismissed, but enough were arrested and shot to ensure that none of the survivors dared to do anything unless Stalin wanted it done. Any spark of initiative had been completely stamped out in the name of establishing direct control from the top. All responsibility was thrown onto the shoulders of junior officers; trapped in the contradictions between the ideals of their indoctrination and ugly realities, overburdened by duties beyond their means to meet, the number of suicides among their ranks would climb to shocking levels.

By this time, the German military had been honed to become a sharp and powerful offensive weapon. To Adolf Hitler, the Soviet giant to the East seemed to be in convulsions that reduced it to a state of feebleness and vulnerability. Nazi officials and German officers marveled at the self-destructive lunacy of the purges. The mindless savagery had gone beyond the point where it was possible to convincingly assign even the most cynical and brutal rationales to it. The Red Army

had been almost decapitated by its own leader, reducing a powerful force that had been at the leading edge of new concepts and tactics to almost complete paralysis.

Soviet society had been thoroughly destabilized, with so many people arrested that it was hard to keep the trains running. Soviet agriculture had been all but wrecked. A census had been conducted in 1937 that showed that the Soviet population had declined considerably since the previous census. All on the census board were arrested, to disappear from the face of the Earth. The next census board would be more careful in its findings.

Stalin would succeed in building a mighty industrial machine, but almost unarguably much more in spite of the brutality than because of it. In addition, many of the grand show projects of the Soviet State were frauds, a misallocation of resources at the very best, at worst imposing but worthless. Tens of thousands died to dig the White Sea-Baltic canal, which proved too shallow to be useful.

When people were arrested in the middle of the night, they almost always asked: "Zachto?!" -- Why?! What for?! Hardened criminals who were arrested became something of an "upper class" in the Gulag, serving as guards who could be trusted to be brutal to the other prisoners, the innocents who had simply been swept up in the purges. The Soviet state proved most effective at punishing those who had done nothing wrong. Stalin was creating his own idea of a New Soviet Man, a cowed creature who seemed hardly likely to stand up to the tough legions of the Fuehrer.

* Hitler had been testing the waters for war for several years. In 1936, he sent his still-weak army into the Rhineland, which had been demilitarized by the Versailles Treaty. The French and the British did nothing of consequence, and Hitler was emboldened for further moves. Stalin did not fail to notice the feeble response to the aggression. He also did not fail to notice the creation of a pact between Germany, a clear future enemy, and Japan, a past enemy that had humiliated Tsarist Russia. The pact, which would later include Italy, was clearly aimed at the USSR.

At home, Stalin's power was absolute, but that did not mean he felt confident. Stalin's distrust was pathological and the people had to be kept under the whip. In particular, they would not be allowed to be infected with ideas from the outside world. When US Navy battle cruiser AUGUSTA and four destroyers paid a courtesy call for four days to the Siberian port of Vladivostok, the American sailors had the run of the streets of the city and chatted with Soviet citizens, often trading souvenirs. The American warships were similarly open to the Soviet public, and many paid a cordial visit to their decks. There was nothing unusual about such a courtesy call, it was a naval tradition. Russian sailors had paid a similar courtesy call to the US during the American Civil War and had been treated like visiting royalty. The visit of the AUGUSTA had been approved by the Soviet leadership.

When the warships left, mass arrests began. Sailors were accused of having been recruited as spies for the Americans, and were intimidated or tortured into signing bogus confessions. There was the same dismal round of executions and transportations to the Gulag. The approval for the visit may have been a bureaucratic mixup, but it is frighteningly possible that Stalin himself gave the go-ahead for it. The Americans would leave with the impression of a friendly, open society, and the mess they left behind could be cleaned up out of their sight.

Stalin cast his net wider for other groups to intimidate. He learned of the teachings of the quack geneticist Lysenko, who repudiated mainstream evolutionary ideas for a half-baked form of "directed evolution" that appealed to Stalin's Marxist ideology. Lysenko had a knack for appearing a homespun genius while pouring out a line of preposterous pseudoscientific doubletalk designed to trim to the political winds, and Stalin bought into him completely.

Why not? Despite the claim of Communism to be scientific, Stalin did not understand the sciences and did not want to understand them. To him, there were no scientific truths, based on concrete and supportable evidence, which remained the same no matter what anyone thought of them. To Stalin, the truth was whatever he wanted it to be. He was all-wise; all-knowing; nobody could contradict him; and the thought that he could be wrong apparently never crossed his mind.

Furthermore, Lysenko had the classic mentality of a crank, believing that his brilliant ideas were being suppressed by a scientific establishment committed to the fraudulent established wisdom. Having been granted Stalin's ear Lysenko, unlike most cranks, could actually *do* something about the "conspiracy" against him. Geneticists who had criticised Lysenko were thrown into the security machine. Many did not return. Lysenko's influence would linger for a quarter of a century, doing much to grossly set back Soviet genetics.

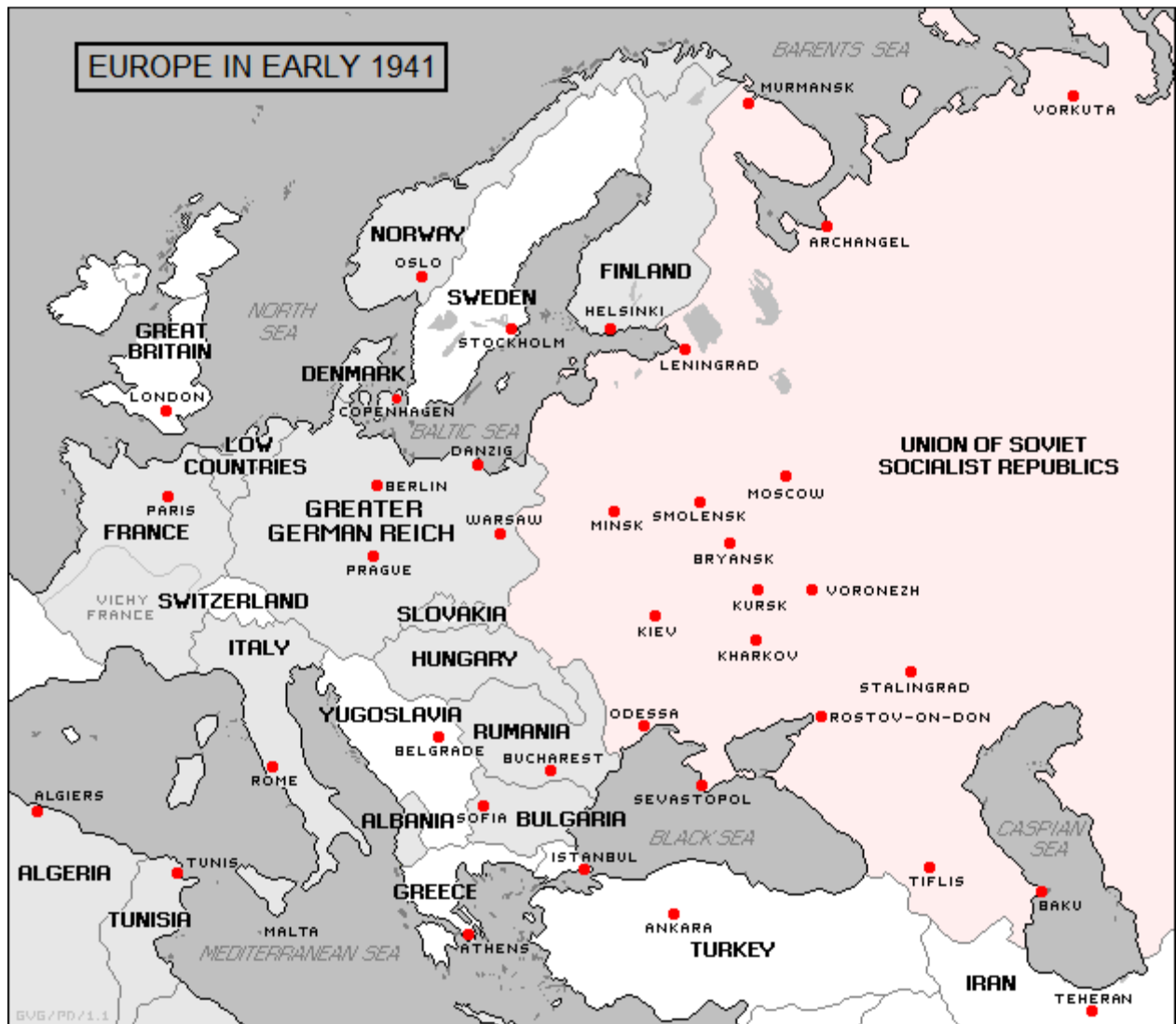
That machine ground on relentlessly. In 1938, Vyacheslav Molotov, Stalin's old crony and currently the state's premier, had suggested a list of new ministers of the Supreme Soviet. Within two years, they had all been murdered or imprisoned. The pressure on the peasants did not let up even as the upper levels of Soviet society were cleansed.

Propaganda films showed smiling peasants dancing at harvest celebrations and praising the regime. The films did little to inspire the peasants, because they were all under iron control, subject to widespread terror, and knew from painful experience the films were lies. Nikita Krushchev did the will of Stalin in the Ukraine, writing to the Great Leader in a cable: I HAVE SENT YOU 18,000 ENEMIES OF THE STATE. Anyone even suspected of disloyalty was swept up, and practical resistance was almost out of the question.

[2.0] A Friendship Of Thieves

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* The rise of the Soviet state under Stalin and the threat that state posed to the nations of Europe had helped create Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime in Europe. Although Stalin and Hitler were natural enemies, their mutual fear and loathing led to an odd result: the two dictators decided to become allies. It was strictly an arrangement of convenience, of course. The two knew they would betray each other sooner or later, and as it turned out it was Hitler who bettered Stalin at that game.



[2.1] WAR & SHADOWS OF WAR

* In 1936, the Spanish Civil War broke out, with General Franco and his Nationalist forces moving against the leftist Republican regime. The conflict gave Fascism and Communism a worldwide stage on which to trade blows. Hitler found the war convenient, since it distracted world attention from German rearmament; Stalin similarly found the war convenient, since it distracted world attention from his purges. Hitler sent the 8,000 man air-land Condor Legion to augment Mussolini's large-scale aid to Franco. Stalin sent 3,000 Soviet "volunteers", along with fighters and pilots, tanks and crews, to support the Spanish Republicans. The war was an excellent testing ground for new weapons and tactics for both sides.

Franco's Nationalists would crush the Republicans completely in the spring of 1939. Franco was aided by the fact that the Republicans spent an excessive amount of effort fighting among themselves, conducting lunatic purges that dissipated energy and spread demoralization. Stalin sent agents of the NKVD, the new name for the OGPU, along with the fighters and tanks, and the NKVD men hunted down Trotskyites and anarchists ruthlessly. Stalin proved more interested in crushing his internal enemies than in winning the war.

However, although the Republicans lost the civil war, the conflict proved a significant propaganda victory for Stalin. The Soviets seemed to Westerners to be making a valiant stand against Hitler and Fascism, while Stalin kept his own brutalities hidden. Many Westerners became Communists, and some, like Kim Philby in Britain, were recruited by the NKVD to become spies. When the war was over, the Soviet military advisors and NKVD men returned to the USSR. They had been contaminated by contact with the West, however, and had been out of sight and so out of control. To Stalin, they were suspect, and many of the senior officers among their ranks were murdered.

Mikhail Kotsov had been a war correspondent in Spain, and had become a Soviet star for his reports from the battle lines. In May 1937, Kotsov was called back to Moscow, where he was ordered to report to Stalin. He met Stalin the company of Molotov, Voroshilov, and a few other of Stalin's cronies. Stalin asked him questions about the war, and Kotsov answered as best he could. Then Stalin began to clown around in a strange way. He stood up, put his hand on his heart, and asked: "How do they address you in Spanish? 'Miguel' or something?"

"Miguel", Kotsov answered, correcting Stalin's slight mispronunciation.

"Don Miguel, we honorable Spaniards thank you for your excellent report."

"I serve the Soviet Union, Comrade Stalin."

Kotsov was dismissed and turned to leave, but as he got to the door Stalin called after him: "And do you own a revolver, Comrade Kotsov?"

Kotsov was baffled, but replied: "Yes, I do, Comrade Stalin."

"And you are not planning to shoot yourself with it?"

"No, Comrade Stalin. I never even thought of it!"

"Well, that's excellent, Don Miguel! All the best, then, Comrade Kotsov."

Kotsov told this story to his brother, the famous political cartoonist Boris Yefimov. In hindsight, the performance was similar to the way a cat toys with a mouse before devouring it, but neither Kotsov or Yefimov took the matter seriously. Mikhail Kotsov was then arrested and sentenced to ten years in prison. Yefimov went to the judge to inquire about his brother's health, and the judge reassured him that he was fine. In fact, Kotsov had already been executed.

* Stalin kept the Soviet propaganda machine in full gear to denounce Hitler and the Nazi regime, though events would soon prove there was less to it than met the ear. At the League of Nations, Soviet Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov appealed to western nations to help confront Germany, and in London, Soviet ambassador Myske was sounding out the British and French. The diplomatic measures were not resoundingly successful. Stalin did not trust the West and he was not trusted in return, particularly since the "ComIntern" (the Communist International movement) was busily engaged in subversive "agitprop (agitation-propaganda)" against Western governments, with particular effect in France.

In March 1938, Hitler annexed Austria unopposed. Once again, Britain and France failed to respond to a gross provocation. Now Hitler turned his attention to Czechoslovakia, angrily denouncing the "persecution" of ethnic Germans in the Czech border region of the Sudetenland and mouthing threats at Prague. By the end of the year, the British and French, through the mediation of Mussolini, pressured Czechoslovakia into ceding the Sudetenland to Germany. Since the Sudetenland contained the only practical defenses against a German invasion, Czechoslovakia was now defenseless.

British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, returning from the signing of the Munich Pact that ceded the Sudetenland to Germany, announced in a phrase that has become a historical exercise in irony: "Peace for our time." Winston Churchill said: "The governments of France and Britain had to choose between shame and war. They have chosen shame." In early 1939, Hitler occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia and declared that the country no longer existed.

Given how devious Stalin was, it is unclear that he was ever really sincere about courting the West. His diplomatic overtures may have been nothing more than a way of raising the stakes in a potential deal with Hitler. If so, now it was time to make such a deal. Despite the noisy and acid accusations flying back and forth between the two countries, since neither dictator was overly burdened by a sense of principle there was no real obstacle to coming to a convenient agreement.

The prize in the deal was Poland. Hitler wanted to expand East, and Poland was clearly the first target. As long as Hitler was devouring Poland, Stalin saw no reason why he should not get a piece of the pie as well, since it was valuable property in itself and would serve to provide

further buffer space between Moscow and Berlin. It may have been precisely what Stalin had been planning all along.

[2.2] THE NAZI-SOVIET NONAGGRESSION PACT

* In March 1939, the 18th Party Congress met in Moscow. Applause for Stalin was loud, continuous, and strained, since everyone knew any sign of a lack of enthusiasm might be fatal. Indeed, it is said that there were NKVD agents among the crowd looking for anyone who seemed insufficiently motivated. 60% of the delegates from the previous Party Congress were dead by this time. That was the visible tip of the iceberg. In the 1937:1938 timeframe, there had been from 7 to 8 million arrests and at least a million executions. At a site near Minsk, one mass grave held 30,000 bodies.

On the fifth day of the Congress, the news reached the body that Hitler had occupied Czechoslovakia. War was clearly imminent. Although Stalin had little faith in France and Britain, he still allowed Maxim Litvinov to make one last appeal for collective security against Germany. The appeal went nowhere; the French and British were clearly not going to do anything. On May Day, the USSR conducted its annual military parades. Observers had long realized that the lineup of figures on the podium with Stalin was a significant hint for who was important and who was not in the leadership circles. German diplomats realized that Litvinov, the advocate of collective security with France and Britain, was not there.

The next day, Hitler was told that Litvinov has been replaced by Vyacheslav Molotov as foreign minister -- Litvinov, incidentally, was not purged, just put on the shelf in case he might prove useful later. To the Fuehrer, the news was like "a volley from a gun". In July, Molotov told the German ambassador to the USSR that the Soviet Union sought better relations with Germany. Diplomatic contacts and negotiations intensified, even as the propaganda machines of both nations continued to pour out mutual abuse. On 11 August, an Anglo-French military mission arrived in Moscow to discuss military cooperation. The effort was half-hearted, and they were wasting their time anyway.

Hitler hesitated to invade Poland as long as there was a strong possibility that the Soviet Union might intervene against him. The diplomatic feelers seemed to be moving too slowly, so on 20 August Hitler personally wired Moscow, suggesting that the Nazi foreign minister, Ribbentrop, go there in two days. On 23 August, Ribbentrop flew to Moscow. His trip did not exactly go smoothly; the haste in which the meeting had been arranged led to a bureaucratic mixup, and his airliner had been fired on by Soviet border defenses and forced to land. The snarl was cleaned up and matters moved on.

The Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact was drawn up quickly and signed. Stalin drank a toast to Hitler, though when Ribbentrop drafted a bright and enthusiastic press release, Stalin suggested that be toned down a bit in light of the fact that the two nations had been "pouring filth over each other" for years. The pact had secret clauses, one of which acknowledged the right of USSR to occupy the Baltic States, with the Soviet Union paying Germany a large sum in compensation for

Hitler's claims in Lithuania. Another secret clause detailed the partition of Poland. Soviet Anti-Fascist propaganda was ordered stopped immediately. In fact, the term "Fascist" was banned from public media, and would not resurface again officially for the better part of two years.

On seeing a news report of the pact, cadets at a Soviet military staff college thought it was some sort of prank. Those who believed it were shocked. Some Communists in other nations finally saw Stalin for what he was, a cynical tyrant, though most Reds went into denial and simply toed the party line, even when it meant they had to turn around to do it. Intelligent observers knew the pact meant war.

[2.3] WORLD WAR II BEGINS / THE WINTER WAR

* The British, though unprepared, had swallowed enough of Hitler's assurances. Within two days, Chamberlain signed a treaty binding Britain to go to war if Poland were invaded.

On 31 August 1939, Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels claimed that Poland had attacked German towns near the Polish border. A raid was staged with SS men in Polish uniforms, and a concentration-camp prisoner killed as a prop. The Germans invaded Poland the next day. On 3 September, the British kept their commitment to the Poles and declared war on Germany. The French joined the British within hours.

The Wehrmacht swept through Poland. The Polish Army fought back as well as it could, but the Poles were overwhelmed. Luftwaffe bombers pounded Warsaw. Soon Stalin made his move, invading Poland from the East on 17 September 1939, two weeks after the beginning of the German invasion. German and Soviet generals conferred to coordinate their actions, and Luftwaffe aircraft were allowed to use Soviet air bases near Minsk in their operations against the Poles.

Within six weeks, Poland had ceased to exist. German and Soviet troops performed a collaborative military parade for their military leaders near the fortress of Brest. The NKVD moved in behind Soviet soldiers, and arrests, deportations, and executions began. Roughly 15,000 Polish officers were trucked off to Katyn Forest near Smolensk and were not seen alive again. Polish farmers were forced into collectives and young Polish men were conscripted into the Red Army. They would not prove enthusiastic soldiers.

* Stalin was entirely pleased to see the Western powers at each other's throats. He believed they would weaken themselves fighting each other, and in the meantime they would not be in a position to interfere with Soviet aggressions. Things seemed to be going his way at the other end of the Soviet Union as well. The Japanese across the border from Siberia in Manchukuo had been a potential threat that weighed on Stalin's mind, but for the time being that problem had been triumphantly resolved.

There had been a short border clash between Japanese and Soviet troops in the summer of 1938. The fighting flared up again in May 1939, the Japanese hoping that they could derail the

rapprochement between Nazi Germany and the USSR. The fighting escalated by the end of June to a full-blown border war involving hundreds of thousands of troops. The Red Army had been getting the worst of it, until General Georgy Zhukov was sent to take charge. Zhukov had joined the Tsar's army during World War I, having gone over to the Red Army in 1918 to then rise steadily up the ranks. Zhukov put his troops on the defense and built up forces and supplies. This was time-consuming since he was in a remote and unimproved region with long and thin supply lines, but by mid-August he was ready to attack. He had put much effort into deception operations to mask his preparations and the Japanese Sixth Army was taken by surprise.

Zhukov demanded tight coordination between infantry, armor, and artillery, and showed little concern for casualties. The Japanese were encircled, though they managed to escape the trap with considerable losses. By the first week of September the fighting was over, the battle of Khalkin-Gol having proven a Soviet success. It would prove a template for Zhukov's later operations, both in its overall strategy and in its general indifference to the lives of Soviet soldiers.

Although the border conflict attracted little worldwide attention since it had been upstaged by events in Europe, the action was strategically significant. The Japanese, despite a widespread belief in their own military invincibility, were not inclined to get into a fight with the Soviets again any time soon, allowing Stalin to focus on Hitler for the time being. It was also a great propaganda victory that avenged Russia's humiliation in the Russo-Japanese war.

* Encouraged by this success, Stalin overreached himself. He had attempted to negotiate with the Finns to obtain strategically important Finnish territory that would help defend Leningrad. The Finns were open to the idea of adjusting their borders somewhat, trading Soviet territory for Finnish territory, but Stalin also wanted to establish a naval base at Hango, well to the west; the Finns didn't like that idea. After two months of negotiations that went nowhere, on 30 November 1939 Stalin invaded Finland with 29 divisions. The Finns faced the invasion with only nine divisions.

Red Air Force bombers kicked off the attack with raids on Helsinki and other cities. The Soviet divisions were organized into five armies and drove into the country all along the frontier. Stalin was confident that Finland would be conquered in two weeks or so, with Red Army troops given instructions on how they should conduct themselves when they reached the Swedish border. However, the Finns were prepared for the attack. They had built stout defensive lines, and in the northern parts of the country, roads and other facilities along the border had been left undeveloped to channel attacks into kill traps. Soviet intelligence was so poor that the invaders simply blundered into them, to be cut down in rows.

Stalin had expected the Finns to sue for peace immediately. Instead, they loudly protested the bombings of their cities in the world press, with Soviet propaganda foolishly claiming that all the bombers had dropped were breadbaskets. The Finns provided pictures of bomb damage -- including hits on the Soviet embassy -- and began to refer to Soviet bombs as "Molotov breadbaskets". Finnish leader Augustus von Mannerheim was strong-willed and competent, directing a stubborn defense; two Soviet armies driving up the Karelian Isthmus were stopped cold at the system of fortifications known as the "Mannerheim Line". Three other Soviet armies

driving into Finland in the center of the borderline were hit with flanking counterattacks and badly chewed up. One of these three armies, the Soviet 9th Army, was cut off and completely destroyed.

Soviet troops advancing through the frontier forests found them wintry deathtraps, one soldier saying: "There was no enemy visible anywhere. It was as if the forest was doing the shooting all by itself." The Finns would disappear into woods if the Soviets tried to chase after them in force. If the force was too small, it was likely to be ambushed and completely wiped out. One Ukrainian private wrote: "They are swatting us like flies."

In the north, the Soviets did achieve success by seizing the Arctic port of Petsamo, which was in an important nickel-producing area. However, the great Soviet giant had been humiliated. The army purges had done much to wreck the Red Army, and now the weakness of the Soviet giant was in full view for all the world to see.

The Winter War lasted for four months, through one of the harshest winters in memory in a region where winters were normally harsh. The Red Army finally sat down, got organized, and set up a proper offensive using eleven more divisions and large quantities of tanks and aircraft. The Finns were forced to capitulate and cede important territories to the USSR.

The victory was a bitter one for Stalin. Over a million of his soldiers had been committed to battle and at least 200,000 of them had been killed. One Soviet general was said to have remarked: "We have won enough ground to bury our dead." Stalin was indifferent to the suffering of his people, but he could not conceal that the Red Army was weak and inept. He began an immediate program to repair the damage he had done to the military. There was a major reorganization in early May 1940, with some competent officers placed in top positions. Zhukov, who had been brought west late in the Winter War, became chief of staff of the Red Army.

However, Stalin still wanted the military under his thumb. Inept toadies were retained in high positions, and signs of independence by others were not tolerated. When a senior Red Air Force general named Rychagov was criticised in a meeting with Stalin and others for excessive numbers of crashes, he replied angrily that he was being given "flying coffins" and not airplanes. Stalin replied coldly: "You should not have said that." Rychagov was promptly arrested and later shot.

Hitler did not fail to take the Winter War into account, seeing in it more evidence of Stalin's untrustworthiness, as well as evidence that the Red Army was a paper tiger. The friendship of two thieves still continued in public. In December, Stalin turned 60 years old, and Hitler sent him cordial greetings; Stalin proclaimed in return their "long-lasting" friendship.

The Soviets sold the Germans grain, oil, and other raw materials, in accordance with trade agreements that followed on the coattails of the non-aggression pact, and Stalin even arrested German Communists who had fled to Moscow. They were handed over to Hitler's Gestapo, to be tortured and executed. Stalin went so far as to allow the Germans to set up a U-boat base near

Murmansk, though it never became operational since the British sank the first two submarines sent there, and events quickly rendered it redundant anyway.

* In the West, a "Phoney War" prevailed, with France and Britain in a largely defensive posture. There was little action, and little pressure was put on the Germans. The quiet did not last.

On 8 April 1940, Hitler invaded Denmark and Norway. Denmark was swiftly occupied. An Anglo-French expeditionary force attempted to defend Norway and inflicted substantial naval losses on the Germans, but the Germans managed to drive the British and French out, with the Norwegians forming a government in exile. Norway's fjords provided excellent naval bases for the German Navy's ships and submarines. On 10 May 1940, Hitler invaded the Low Countries and France. Three German Army groups participated in the offensive, with the main weight of German armor provided to Army Group A, operating through southern Belgium and Luxembourg.

The Germans were faced by the Belgian and Dutch armies, three French army groups, and a highly mobile British Expeditionary Force (BEF). German Army Group B swept into Holland and northern Belgium, quickly rolling back resistance, and drawing a French army group and the BEF north along the coast to meet them. It was an enormous trap. German Army Group A swept through the center of the French lines and swung northwest towards the coast. By 27 May, Anglo-French forces along the coast were encircled. By 5 June, the pocket was all but eliminated. However, most of the BEF and many French troops were evacuated across the English Channel from Dunkirk. 330,000 men were evacuated, though they lost most of their heavy equipment.

In England, Neville Chamberlain resigned and Winston Churchill became Prime Minister. Churchill tried to rally resistance against the German offensive through France, but Hitler's Wehrmacht was unstoppable. The German divisions turned south. Army Group B reached the Seine below Paris on 9 June. Army Group A broke through French lines to the northeast of Paris on 12 June and charged into the interior of the country, while Army Group C, facing the French Maginot Line, jumped in and help complete a massive encirclement of French forces. Surviving French forces were in wild flight, and on 17 June the French government capitulated. On 22 June, Hitler accepted their formal surrender. Hitler returned from accepting the French surrender to Berlin, where he was given a hero's welcome.

Stalin closed down Soviet embassies as the nations of the West fell to the German juggernaut, in recognition that these nations no longer had an independent existence. However, Koba was startled by the rapid collapse of France: "Couldn't they have put up any resistance at all? Now Hitler's going to beat our brains in!" Stalin still had to keep up appearances and sent congratulations to the Fuehrer on his "splendid success".

The German preoccupation in the West still presented an opportunity, and of course Koba made use of it. In June 1940, Stalin swallowed up the Baltic states, annexing Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, including the small German territorial concession in Lithuania. The NKVD immediately moved in and instituted the terror in which NKVD agents had become so practiced.

At the end of June, Stalin also demanded that Rumania cede important border regions to the USSR, and these regions were quickly occupied by the Red Army. Rumania was a German ally and the Reich's main source of oil. The Rumanian territories occupied by the Soviets gave Stalin a position from which he could threaten Rumanian oilfields. Hitler moved more forces into Poland to counter Soviet moves, and signed treaties with Finland, Hungary, Rumania, and Bulgaria to allow the movement of German forces through their territories. Stalin, alarmed, offered concessions to Berlin.

Stalin also took care of smaller items. He had a score to settle with Leon Trotsky, his old rival, who had sought asylum in Mexico and was publishing annoying blasts against Stalin in the leftist press, with titles like "Stalin, Hitler's Quartermaster" and "The Heavenly Twins, Hitler & Stalin". Trotsky knew that Stalin had a long reach, but though Trotsky was at heart just as ruthless as Stalin, he was courageous and did not try to hide. A Red agent named Ramon Mercador infiltrated Trotsky's household and, on 20 August 1940, smashed in his skull with a mountain-climbing pick. Many sources give the weapon as an "ice pick" which is sort of true but misleading; the mountain-climbing pick was a favorite weapon of NKVD agents, since it was easy to carry and conceal, and was very lethal.

Koba's orders were implemented by Lavrenti Beria, who had become head of the NKVD in 1938 following the arrest and execution of his predecessor. He had become one of the most indispensable of Stalin's cronies; pictures show a balding man, appearing sinister behind round glasses and usually wearing a slight, contemptuous smile. It was said that his hobby was rape: his men would pick up an attractive girl and take her to his quarters, where he would give her a glass of drugged wine that would render her agreeable. Afterwards, she would be thrown back out on the streets. Who could they complain to? The law? Beria *was* the law, or what passed for it.

[2.4] THE THIEVES FALL OUT

* Winston Churchill was determined to carry on the fight with the Nazis. Even before the fall of France, Churchill had decided to restore diplomatic relations with the USSR -- the British ambassador to the Soviet Union had been withdrawn in protest during the Winter War -- and dispatched Sir Stafford Cripps, a prominent British Socialist, to Moscow, with the diplomat arriving at the beginning of July. Cripps carried a letter from Churchill outlining Nazi plans against the Soviets.

Stalin regarded the letter as pure lies and even went so far as to tell the Germans what Churchill was up to, as a way of reassuring the Reich that the USSR really was a reliable ally. Cripps remained in Moscow, but Koba merely toyed with the ambassador, using him mostly to "annoy the Germans". Stalin certainly had no trust in Adolf Hitler, but everything seemed to be working well for the Red cause. Koba was perfectly happy to see the Western nations wear themselves out, while he took advantage of the situation to seize more territories for himself.

As for Germany, Stalin believed he could deal with that problem later. German bombers were pounding Britain in an attempt to pave the way for invasion; Stalin did not believe that Hitler

would attack the USSR while the British were still actively fighting the Reich, that the Fuehrer would not be so mad as to commit Germany to a war on two fronts. Stalin believed that there was no way that Hitler would be able to turn on the Soviet Union before the spring of 1942. Besides, Hitler usually conducted a propaganda offensive against a victim before invading it, which would give Stalin warning that an attack was coming.

In reality, Hitler had decided to deal with the USSR on his return from accepting the surrender of the French. Although he had spoken against conducting a war on two fronts in MEIN KAMPF, the French had been taken completely off the playing board, and he believed that Britain had been more or less militarily neutralized and might even come to terms with the Reich soon enough -- a belief that was subtly encouraged by Churchill, who sent bogus "leaks" to the Reich through indirect and completely deniable channels that a deal might be possible. Publicly, Churchill made it very clear that a deal was out of the question -- and he meant it.

An attack on the Soviet Union was still risky, but Hitler believed he had good reason to move quickly. He judged that the British were fighting on in expectation that the Soviets would join in on their side -- a notion that was given some substance in the Fuehrer's mind by visits of British ambassador Cripps to the Kremlin. Stalin simply wanted to use British diplomatic overtures as a lever against the Germans, a hint that the Soviets might lean toward the British if the Reich didn't play nice. Ironically, in Hitler's suspicious mind the hint sounded much more like a dire threat, the Fuehrer seeing in the diplomatic exercise evidence of an emerging conspiracy of Britain and the Soviet Union against Germany. However frustrating it was to Cripps to put up with Stalin's games and snubs, the ambassador's presence in Moscow was still serving, in a Zen fashion, Britain's interests.

Very well, so Hitler thought, crush the USSR and the British would have nowhere to turn to, the Americans having made it plain up to that time they would not go to war under almost any circumstances. Besides, the Soviet Union was rearming and the Red Army was being reorganized, it made sense to strike before the Soviets became a greater threat; and if there was going to be a long war, the Reich needed to get control over Soviet resources to sustain the fight.

Hitler had logical reasons to invade the USSR as soon as possible and no particular inclination to show his hand with belligerent propaganda. After a few days of consultation with key advisors, on 31 July 1940 he announced to his generals his intent to attack the Soviet Union within a year. Hitler's generals later claimed they were unhappy with the idea, but this appears to have been self-serving hindsight. The dismal performance of the Red Army against Finland seemed to prove that the USSR was no match for Germany. Hitler told his generals: "You only have to kick in the door, and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down."

Hitler signed "Order 18", formally stepping up preparations for the invasion of the USSR. He continued to build up a fleet of landing craft to invade Britain through the summer, though his military planners couldn't agree on how it might actually be successfully done. By the end of the summer, mounting losses of aircraft over Britain would force the Luftwaffe to turn to inaccurate night attacks, intended to terrorize the British people and hopefully get rid of the pigheaded Churchill -- though it simply ended up drawing out deep reserves of stubbornness and defiance.

Bombers of the British Royal Air Force (RAF) had proven effective in smashing concentrations of German shipping and landing craft in French ports, forcing Hitler to disperse the shipping. The plan to invade Britain, such as it was, was shelved indefinitely. Hitler was already talking to the Japanese to seek assistance in an attack on the Soviet Union. The Japanese, however, had nothing to gain from a fight with the USSR, and would sign a non-aggression treaty with Stalin in April 1941.

* In the meantime, the false front of the thieves' friendship was beginning to wear thin. In November 1940, Molotov went to Berlin at Hitler's request. Hitler proposed that the USSR join the Axis, claiming that Britain was all but beaten and that the Soviet Union should work with the Germans to help carve up the British empire. Molotov, notoriously single-minded and impassive, simply replied with a list of complaints about hostile German actions in Finland and Rumania. The two sides were not communicating, which was just as well for the Soviets since Hitler was clearly engaging in a deception operation. On the last night of the conference, 12 November 1940, British bombers raided Berlin. Molotov could not restrain himself from asking Ribbentrop: "If England is beaten, why are we sitting in this shelter?"

Molotov went back to Moscow empty-handed. Stalin remained complacent, though he must have become more nervous as events unfolded. The Soviet Union had no allies and its military remained in a disorganized and demoralized state. In truth, Stalin had committed himself so thoroughly to the friendship of convenience with Hitler that he could not admit to himself that it might backfire drastically. He was the Great Leader. He was infallible. No one dared defy him. He could not be wrong.

[2.5] HITLER PLOTS AGAINST THE USSR

* Hitler knew that a long campaign against the USSR would be dangerous. He told his generals that the Red Army had to be decisively defeated in no more than ten weeks, and that the whole campaign could not last more than 17 weeks. Hitler was concerned about having to fight during the notoriously difficult Russian winters, and he also knew that the Reich didn't have the logistical capability to support a long war.

The German attack plan, codenamed Operation OTTO, was constrained by Russian terrain, particularly the huge region of swamps, bogs, and forests known as the Pripet Marshes that stood in the center of the path of an advance into the Soviet Union. The Pripet Marshes were 480 kilometers (300 miles) wide and 240 kilometers (150 miles) deep. An attack would have to flow around the north of the marshes toward Minsk and around the south of the marshes toward Kiev.

The planners of the operation assumed that the Soviets would establish major forces north and south of the marshes, with a reserve in the rear near Moscow. Three army groups were to mass on the border of the USSR, with Army Group North assigned to drive from East Prussia north towards Leningrad, which had extensive armaments industry; Army Group Center assigned to drive from East Prussia and Poland through Minsk and Smolensk and on towards Moscow; and Army Group South assigned to drive from southern Poland and Rumania towards Kiev, the heart of the Ukraine.

Once Leningrad and Kiev on the flanks were secure, Army Groups North and South would converge on Moscow to help Army Group Center crush the Red Army for good. The generals spent four months working on the plan for OTTO, which evolved to a modified plan named FRITZ, and tested their plans with large-scale military exercises, but Hitler did not like it. Hitler thought seizing Moscow was irrelevant. The real objective was to destroy the Red Army. Hitler did not want to end up like Napoleon, isolated in Moscow while the Russians cut his supply lines. In December 1940, he cancelled FRITZ and put a new plan in its place. The new plan was codenamed Operation BARBAROSSA, meaning "Red Beard", for the German 12th-century emperor Frederick I, who had died on a crusade. According to legend, Barbarossa would rise again when the German people needed him the most.

Hitler insisted that the Red Army must be destroyed in the western regions of the Soviet Union, in front of a line defined by the Dvina and Dnieper rivers. Army Group North would drive towards Leningrad as before, but its primary objective would be to drive Soviet forces into the Baltic States, where they would be encircled and destroyed.

Army Group Center would drive beyond Minsk and towards Smolensk in a two-pronged attack designed to encircle Soviet forces in the region, and then destroy them. Army Group Center would then move from Smolensk to help Army Group North in the drive on Leningrad. Capture of Leningrad would give the Germans a valuable port to help support further offensive operations. Although a number of senior officers disagreed, Hitler did not believe that Moscow was all that important. Its capture could wait.

Army Group South would move on Kiev as in OTTO and then curve south along the Dnieper to isolate Soviet forces in the region and then wipe them out. With Soviet forces in the Ukraine eliminated, Army Group South would then move on to the industrial regions of the Donetz Basin and the oilfields of the Caucasus.

Once these operations were complete and most of the Red Army was destroyed, then all three army groups would converge on Moscow to finish the offensive. The Germans would consolidate their new territory, establishing a defensive border line anchored at Archangel in the north running south along the river Volga. There was no thought of advancing farther; an advance to the Pacific through what was mostly wilderness would have been a logistical monstrosity, and Hitler knew he didn't have the resources to try, or for that matter much reason to care. With the Red Army destroyed and the most valuable assets of what was once the USSR in German hands, Hitler's new eastern empire would be secure. The industrial regions of the Volga Basin and the Urals would be smashed by the Luftwaffe, ensuring that what remained of the Soviet Union would not be able to regain strength. No doubt the Bolsheviks would come to terms, however humiliating they found them.

The German Army's panzer divisions were to spearhead BARBAROSSA. However, the senior commanders of these forces did not like the plan. General Heinz Guderian, who had developed armored blitzkrieg tactics and demonstrated their effectiveness in the conquest of France, pleaded with Hitler for a bolder stroke that would take advantage of the army's mobile formations. Guderian wanted the armored divisions to plunge as deeply as possible into the USSR, even if they had to be supplied by parachute drops. The deep thrusts would complete

disrupt Soviet defense plans and the infantry divisions following the armored spearhead could mop up the disorganized Red Army.

Hitler rejected Guderian's proposal. The armored divisions would operate as components of the rest of the offensive. In fact, they would mostly be under the senior command of infantry generals who had more conservative ideas about tank warfare. Guderian's disgust was greatly aggravated by the fact that he had grave doubts that an attack on the USSR was wise, and few doubts that it would be very difficult.

The conquered territories would be completely subservient to the Reich. Some ethnic groups, such as the Balts, were regarded as sufficiently Aryan would be "Germanized" and made obedient subjects. Slavs would be enslaved, or simply allowed to starve to death to free their lands for settlement by Aryans. Jews and other undesirables would of course be eliminated.

Late in the planning Hitler issued two orders, one that stated that all Soviet political commissars captured were to be promptly executed, and another that German soldiers who mistreated or killed Soviet civilians were not to be disciplined. Both orders were brutal, and the order giving German soldiers a license to do whatever they liked to the populace was contrary to every concept of conduct and discipline the German officer corps had ever believed in. Some officers refused to accept the order. One wrote in his diary after seeing it: "This kind of thing turns the German into a type of being which had existed only enemy propaganda." He was a minority. Some German Army officers were downright enthusiastic about such harsh measures.

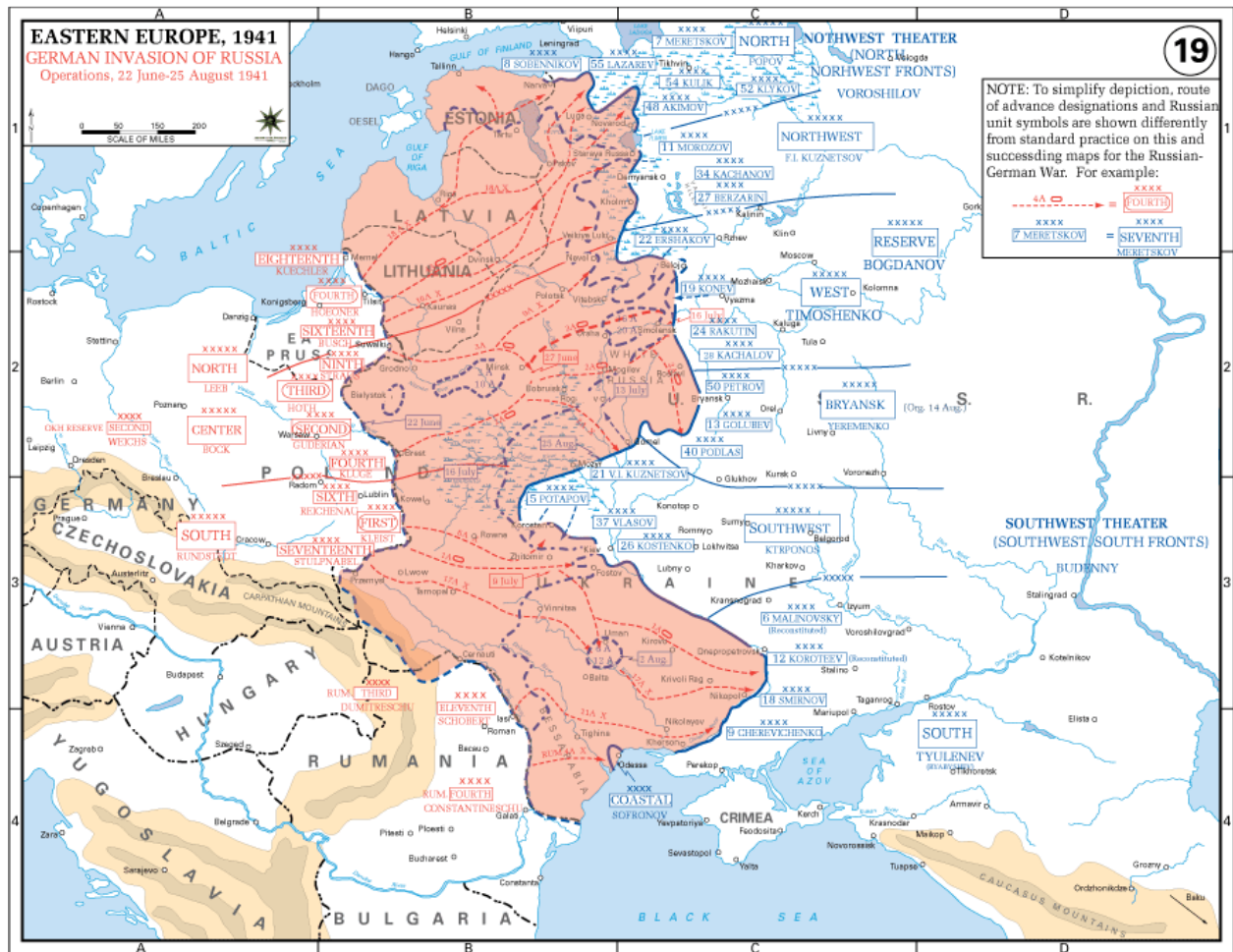
* The Commander of the German Army (Oberkommando des Heeres / OKH) in 1938 was Werner von Brauchitsch, a competent but not brilliant general, chosen more for his loyalty to Hitler than for his abilities. Brauchitsch had operational control of the Army during the blitzkriegs against Poland and the West, but he had little say in the overall planning of the war. When he opposed Hitler on logistical planning for the attack in the west, the Fuehrer browbeat him at length and would not allow him to resign.

Many senior German officers didn't need to be told to toe the line. The OKH chief of staff, Colonel General Franz Halder, was optimistic as well. He agreed that the war would only last ten weeks at most, and there was no strong effort to arrange the production of winter clothing for a longer campaign. They were suffering from "victory fever", a belief in their own infallibility as proven by the easy campaigns in the West. Guderian wrote in his memoirs that senior Wehrmacht officers had eliminated the word "impossible" from their vocabulary.

[3.0] The German Invasion Of The USSR

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* In the summer of 1941, Hitler's armies invaded the Soviet Union and sent the Red Army reeling back in a series of staggering defeats. The catastrophe was a bloody testament to Josef Stalin's foolishness.



[3.1] THE EVE OF THE INVASION

* Following his decision to invade the Soviet Union, Hitler began a major expansion of the Wehrmacht. By the jump-off date for BARBAROSSA, there would be almost 4 million soldiers in the ranks and over 200 divisions. This expansion in particular increased the number of panzer divisions from ten to twenty. However, there had been no coordinated tank production plan, and the number of tanks in each of these twenty divisions was only two-thirds of the numbers in the earlier ten divisions. The average number of tanks in the panzer divisions available for BARBAROSSA was 160, and production of newer and heavier tanks was not enough to compensate for the dilution of numbers. Most of the tanks available were the Panzer Mark IIIs and Mark IVs, as well as the light Czech 38 tank. Their guns lack hitting power. Similarly, German anti-tank guns would also prove to be too light.

In addition, the panzer divisions needed about 3,000 trucks to transport infantry, ammunition, and supplies, and trucks were in limited supply, particularly since motorized infantry divisions needed many trucks as well. Captured French trucks were used to stretch the limited stocks, though the French vehicles were not very rugged. There was a shortage of tires as well. Much of the logistical support for the infantry divisions for BARBAROSSA was to be provided by 625,000 horses; the German Army was still far from a fully mechanized force.

The Luftwaffe was also strained to support the operation. While the Luftwaffe had obtained brilliant successes in the early campaigns of the war, it had been badly cut up during the Battle of Britain and aircraft production had not been rapid enough to make up the shortfall. There were no more aircraft available than there had been to support the invasion of France and the Low Countries.

The quality of German soldiers, however, was not to be doubted. They had won victory after victory, were very confident, highly trained, and well led. The Wehrmacht was, man for man, one of the best fighting forces in the world. However, the rapid expansion of the military meant that the traditions of the old officer corps had been diluted. Many of the new young officers were dedicated Nazis and shared Hitler's crackpot bigotries. They would quickly descend to senseless brutalities in the campaign against the Slavic hordes to the east.

* On paper, the Red Army was impressive, with 4.5 million men and 23,000 tanks. However, much of its equipment was obsolete, and as the disastrous Winter War in Finland had proven, its organization and leadership were very poor. Stalin's purges had taken a military organization with innovative and professional leadership and all but wrecked it. With war with the Germans looming, the Red Army scrambled to reorganize. Crash programs were instituted to improve the quality of the new officers that had been so hastily promoted to fill the vacuum at the top. In a tacit acknowledgement of the indiscriminate foolishness of the purges, 4,000 officers who had been purged were pulled back in from the Gulag or from punitive-duty posts.

Stalin had disbanded the Red Army's large-scale mechanized corps in 1939, dispersing its armor among infantry divisions. The German victories in Poland and the West had proven this decision

unwise, and the mechanized units were hastily thrown back together. They were mostly equipped with the fast but lightly-armored BT-7 tank, which could be destroyed by any German anti-tank weapon. A much improved successor, the T-34, was going into production, but it wouldn't be available in numbers for some time.

By the spring of 1941, the Red Army's reorganization was still very incomplete. Only 30% of Soviet tanks were fully operational. Motor transport was in short supply, as was artillery ammunition of all types, as well as radios. The air force, the VVS, was also overburdened with obsolete equipment, and suffered from poor maintenance and equipment shortages. Pilot training was sketchy at best, since the flight schools were overloaded, under-equipped, and did not have a enough experienced instructors.

Soviet military planning, which almost entirely reflected the wishes of Stalin, did not acknowledge the possibility of a German invasion in the immediate future. However, a war with the Germans was seen as likely over the long run and some preparations were made. Stalin built up stockpiles of food, strategic metals, and oil. He also built up industrial centers east of the Urals, where they would be out of reach of Hitler in case of an invasion, and plans were drawn up for the relocation of industries from the west to the east if that became necessary.

Stalin refused to listen to suggestions that the strategic stockpiles be moved east of the Urals as well. This was part of a larger controversy over the positioning of Red Army forces. One school of thought favored placing them near the USSR's borders, while another school wanted them placed farther in the interior, where they would have more time to react to an attack.

In 1936, the Soviet Union had begun work on an extensive series of fortifications, known as the "Stalin Line", to protect the USSR along a line from the Baltic to the northern side of the Pripet Marshes. In 1941, the Stalin Line had become a formidable obstacle to an invader, though it was by no means continuous, but after the USSR's seizure of new territories to the west the Stalin Line stood well east of the Soviet Union's new borders. Stalin insisted that the Red Army leave their existing fortifications, move up to the new border, and dig in there. He felt that the advantages of extra geographic space outweighed the loss of the fortified line.

Many of Stalin's generals disagreed. They knew that building up new defenses would take time, and even if the defenses were complete, they were so far forward that the Germans would be able to fall on them swiftly and with a high degree of surprise. Connections to rear supply areas were uncomfortably long; there were inadequate mobile forces in the rear to counter a German breakthrough; and the Red Army was not well trained in mobile tactics anyway, making the advantage of extra space questionable. A more rational scheme would have been to deploy light "tripwire" forces at the border to provide an alarm of an attack and delay it, with the bulk of the forces to the rear. Stalin did not agree, and arguing with him could be dangerous. The Red Army did what they could to dig in at their new forward positions.

* In January 1941, Georgy Zhukov, who had been brought west from Siberia late in the Winter War, had helped direct elaborate war games that were conducted by the defense commissar, Marshal Timoshenko. Zhukov's forces played the role of attacker; in the games, his attackers had

wiped out the defenders and penetrated deep into Soviet territory. Stalin was pleased with Zhukov and promoted him to the position of chief of general staff.

Zhukov was well-versed in the theory and practice of war. He was tough, competent, energetic, ruthless, and intolerant of failure in his subordinates. He was not liked, referred to by many as the "Zhuk (beetle or cockroach)" as a descriptive pun on his name, but he was generally respected. Most Soviet generals believed in an active defense and Zhukov was no exception. It was the formula that had brought him victory at Khalkin-Gol: stay on the defensive, build up forces in secret, and then hit the enemy with a massive counterstroke. He disagreed with Stalin's policy of basing the Red Army along the borders, and wanted to retain large and powerful forces well into the interior of the country. However, although Zhukov was inclined to be outspoken, he knew better than to press the matter.

* Hitler had originally scheduled that BARBAROSSA begin on 15 May, and by the beginning of May nearly 80 divisions were in place. Their movements had been concealed by an elaborate campaign of misinformation and deception. Forward airfields had been built in secret, and vast stockpiles of fuel, ammunition, and supplies had been quietly set up near the jumping-off points. Despite all the effort, the plan was running behind schedule. The winter of 1940:1941 had been unusually long, leaving roads in the frontier regions muddy and difficult to use. Stocks of trucks remained inadequate. A delay seemed increasingly likely.

Then the delay became inescapable. On 28 October 1940, Italy had invaded Greece, but the Greeks put up a stiff fight and threw the Italians back to Albania, an Italian colony. The British sent an expeditionary force to help the Greeks. Hitler could not tolerate the presence of the British in the Balkans, since they could move on the Rumanian oil fields that provided the Reich's fuel supply. Greece had to be conquered and the British driven out.

Hitler did not think that the capture of Greece would be difficult or time-consuming, particularly since Yugoslavia was in league with the Reich, having signed a friendship treaty on 25 March 1941. Given Yugoslav cooperation, German troops would be able to reach Greek borders without obstruction. However, on 27 March the anti-German faction in Yugoslavia, encouraged by British agents, overthrew the pro-German government, with the new regime signing a friendship treaty with the USSR on 6 April. Stalin wanted to show the Reich that the Soviet Union would protect its interests in the Balkans; the Fuehrer saw the Kremlin's actions in Yugoslavia as just one more good reason to destroy the Bolsheviks.

On 6 April, with the ink on the friendship treaty between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union barely dry, powerful German formations invaded both Yugoslavia and Greece. The USSR hastily repudiated its friendship treaty. The campaign in the Balkans committed the Reich's military forces, and so BARBAROSSA would have to wait until the operation was complete. BARBAROSSA was postponed to 22 June. Some have claimed that this delay doomed the assault on the USSR from the outset, but as discussed simple logistical difficulties had made a delay likely in any case. Hitler's generals certainly did not protest that the postponement had fatally compromised the plan. Besides, BARBAROSSA was based on strategic military intelligence that would turn out to be very wrong; Hitler was biting off more than he could chew,

and it is hard to demonstrate that the delay in the start of the campaign made a decisive difference.

In any case, Yugoslavia was overrun in 12 days. Stalin, fearful of Hitler, did nothing to stop the invasion. Belgrade, the capital, was heavily bombed by the Luftwaffe, with 17,000 civilians killed. The conquest of Greece took another two weeks. By the end of April 1941, survivors of the British expeditionary force in Greece had been evacuated by sea. Thousands of British soldiers were taken prisoner, and most of the expeditionary force's heavy equipment had to be left behind.

As the Wehrmacht completed mop-up operations in the Balkans, armor and headquarters units began to move northwards back to jump-off points in Rumania, Poland, and East Prussia. Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft worked overtime in flights over the western parts of the USSR to provide precise maps of Soviet military assets that the offensive would need to wipe out. Stalin ordered that nothing be done to interfere with the overflights; there are tales that in a few cases Luftwaffe aircraft suffered engine trouble and landed at Soviet airfields, where they got repairs and fuel, to be sent on their way with a friendly pat on the back.

* The large numbers of Luftwaffe reconnaissance overflights should have alerted Stalin, and the massive German troops movements could hardly be concealed. Hitler glibly told Stalin that he was sending troops to Poland to keep them out of reach of British air raids. Stalin was also receiving surprisingly detailed hints from other quarters. In February, a German who was working at a printing firm passed the Soviet embassy in Berlin a copy of a German-Russian phrasebook that his employers were printing in large quantities for the German Army. Phrases included items such as: "Hands up or I shoot!"

On 1 March Sumner Welles, the American undersecretary of state, had handed the Soviet ambassador to the USA, Konstantin Oumansky, a detailed document outlining Hitler's invasion plans, obtained by the US embassy in Berlin from anti-Nazi Germans. Oumansky was staggered to find out that the Americans had obtained the intelligence back in August 1940, and had run it through careful validation to ensure its authenticity before passing it on to the Soviets. Welles commented later that Oumansky went pale when he realized what he was being told.

In April, Winston Churchill tried to pass on intelligence about the threat to Stalin through Sir Stafford Cripps. Neither Stalin nor Molotov were interested in talking to Cripps, and he simply ended up submitting his report through normal bureaucratic channels. Of course Stalin had every good reason to be suspicious of the British, who had a very strong and obvious interest in turning him against Hitler. Unfortunately, Stalin's suspicions were getting the better of him.

On the night of 10:11 May 1941, Rudolf Hess -- the Nazi Party deputy and a close confidant of the Fuehrer -- stole a Messerschmitt Bf-110 twin-engine fighter and flew to Scotland, where he parachuted to earth, telling his captors he had come to negotiate a settlement between the Reich and Britain. He was deluded: the British simply threw him into prison, where he would remain for the rest of his life. Both the British and the Reich made it publicly clear that Hess, who had long been regarded as eccentric in Nazi Party circles, had gone off the deep end, and there was

nothing more to it than that. Churchill later summed up Hess's mission as a "completely devoted and frantic deed of lunatic benevolence."

Instead of concluding that the story was too crazy to be a lie -- no matter how it was read, it seemed like a bizarre way to conduct secret diplomacy -- Stalin concluded that it was too crazy to be the truth, and became thoroughly obsessed with the incident. The agreement between the denials between the British and the Germans, who much more normally told exactly opposite stories on any matter, must have seemed suspicious, while the implications of a deal between the two were obviously fearsome. A deal with Britain implied that Hitler wouldn't have to worry about the Western front any more and could turn all his unwanted attention on the USSR.

Koba concluded that Churchill's attempts to warn about looming danger were intended to provoke the USSR into mobilization that would give the Germans a pretext to invade. Stalin's thinking seemed to have fallen into the haywired logic of a conspiracy theorist, with historians later trying with little success to puzzle out what he was thinking. Were Britain and the Reich working on a deal that would give the Fuehrer a free hand in the East? Even given that possibility, Hitler remained stuck on the dilemma of a war on two fronts, and so the Germans couldn't be planning to attack. Besides, the Germans were obtaining clear benefits from their alliance with the USSR, why would they have wanted to upset the applecart? However, Stalin believed they were energetically looking for pretexts to do so. Maybe the Reich was just trying to pressure the USSR into making concessions?

Stalin did not think that Adolf Hitler was too scrupulous to attack the USSR. Stalin had absolutely no scruples and had not the slightest belief that Hitler had any either, but Stalin believed that Hitler had no immediate motive for attacking the USSR. Stalin failed to realize that there was a major difference between him and Hitler. Stalin had no ideals and really no vision beyond the accumulation of power, while Hitler was, in his own ugly way, an idealist. Hitler might make a pact of convenience with Stalin, but Hitler saw the Jewish Bolshevik conspiracy as all that was wrong with the world, and he wouldn't sleep well until he had stamped it out. The Fuehrer didn't need a pretext to attack the USSR.

It is now impossible to reconstruct exactly what was going on in Stalin's mind, but it is certainly clear that his emphatic certainties were merely reflections of deep confusions. Under the circumstances, it is not so surprising that Stalin didn't just ignore American and British intelligence, he also ignored his own intelligence. Richard Sorge, an important Red spy placed in the German embassy in Tokyo, reported on 12 May 1941 that an invasion with 150 divisions would jump off on 20 June. Sorge sent a correction on 15 May, saying the invasion would begin on 22 June. Sorge's reports were ignored, as were other intelligence warnings. NKVD head Lavrenti Beria ordered that agents who provided such reports were to be dealt with harshly for supplying "disinformation".

The German ambassador to the USSR, Count von der Schulenberg, was not fond of the Nazis and believed that a German attack on the Soviet Union would be a disaster. He even warned a high Soviet official of preparations for the invasion over lunch. Stalin's only reaction was anger: "Disinformation has now reached the ambassadorial level!"

By June, not only were Luftwaffe overflights providing disturbing hints that something was about to happen, German diplomats were sending their families home and cancelling orders for goods and services, while German ships were clearing out of Soviet ports. If such matters were drawn to Stalin's attentions, he disregarded them. A report released by the state TASS news agency on 14 June flatly denied that there was any truth to rumors that Germany was preparing to attack the USSR and implicitly labeled the rumors as British and American lies, "devoid of all foundations". Stalin was apparently hoping the Germans would step forward and denounce the rumors as well. If so, he was unpleasantly surprised when they didn't. Unfortunately, Red Army officers took the TASS report at face value and dropped their level of readiness.

On 16 June, Stalin received a detailed report on BARBAROSSA obtained from a Red spy in the Luftwaffe command structure, passed on from a Red agent in Switzerland named Alexander Foote. The report was angrily rejected, Stalin saying the spy should "go fuck his mother". On 18 June, a German soldier came across Soviet lines. He was the son of a Communist and pro-Soviet, and after he had got drunk and struck an officer, a serious offense, he had decided to desert. He told them the invasion would begin on the morning of 22 June. When his captors were skeptical, he told them they could shoot him if it didn't come true.

It appears that Stalin did recognize the possibility of an attack. Some measures to increase preparedness were taken as the first day of summer approached, but he was so determined to pursue a policy of appeasement and stalling for time that he simply let down his guard. He had completely suppressed dissent or even discussion, and had no reality checks to tell him that it was time to stop doubletalking and prepare for a fight. Late on 21 June, Stalin finally began to turn around, putting some forces on alert, though he remained cautious and very tentative. Red Army forces were not to return fire if provoked. It was far too late, and the orders did little more than confuse front-line commanders.

[3.2] BARBAROSSA BEGINS / THE FALL OF MINSK

* On 21 June 1941, three million German soldiers had assembled at jumping-off points along the Russian border in preparation for BARBAROSSA. German infantry divisions had been in place since the beginning of the month, to be then bolstered by motorized and armored divisions. The German forces were organized into Army Groups South, Center, and North, supported by a total of 2,400 tanks, 6,000 artillery pieces, and 2,500 aircraft:

- Army Group North was concentrated in East Prussia, and was commanded by Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb. He had 20 infantry divisions, as well as three armored and three motorized infantry divisions. Two Finnish armies would operate in loose cooperation with Army Group North. The Finns had a score to settle with the Soviets, and in fact they would refer to their fight with the USSR as the "Continuation War".
- Army Group Center was deployed in Poland, under Field Marshall Fedor von Bock. He had 33 infantry divisions, nine armored divisions under Heinz Guderian and Hermann Hoth, six motorized infantry divisions, and a cavalry division.

- Army Group South was deployed in southern Poland and Romania, and was under the command of Field Marshall Gerd von Runstedt. He had 33 infantry divisions, plus five armored and three motorized divisions. Army Group South would be assisted by two Romanian armies, one Hungarian army, a Slovakian infantry corps, and an Italian motorized corps. One Luftwaffe air fleet was assigned to support each of the army groups.

The USSR had 2,900,000 men on the western frontier, as well as 15,000 tanks and 9,000 aircraft. Reinforcements were being moved up as well. On paper, these were impressive numbers. In practice, the Red Army's leadership was still in disarray from the purges, most of the equipment was antiquated if it was even in working order, and the country was not even close to full mobilization. This meant that the USSR remained dangerously vulnerable, though at the same time the vast numbers of men and equipment hinted of the resources that the Soviet Union might be able to call upon when pressed.

The western regions of the USSR were divided into four main military regions: Baltic, Western, Kiev, and Odessa regions, which would be renamed "Fronts" in the next few days:

- The Northwest Front was commanded by Colonel-General Feodor Kuznetsov, and consisted of 28 rifle (foot infantry), 4 tank, and 2 motorized infantry divisions.
- The West Front was commanded by General Dmitri Pavlov, and consisted of 25 rifle and cavalry, 13 tank, and 7 motorized divisions.
- The Southwest Front, in the Ukraine, was commanded by Marshall Semyon Budyenny and consisted of 27 rifle and cavalry divisions, 12 armored divisions, and 6 motorized divisions.
- The South Front, operating north of the shores of the Black Sea, was commanded by General Ivan Tulanef, and consisted of 17 rifle and cavalry divisions, 6 armored divisions, and 3 motorized infantry divisions.

In addition to these forces, four armies with 114 divisions were in the process of moving west as reinforcements. Each front also had an aviation component for air support.

* Early in the morning of Sunday, 22 June 1941, Soviet troops in the frontier regions were awakened by heavy incoming artillery fire. The barrages were precisely pre-targeted and methodically destroyed Red Army military assets near the border. Specially trained Wehrmacht assault groups swept over Soviet border guards, wiping them out methodically and securing bridges and other strategic points along the border. One group of German border guards at a bridge eliminated their Soviet counterparts on the other side by the simple measure of asking them to come out for a discussion and then shooting them down.

The Luftwaffe conducted massive strikes far behind the border, in particular targeting Soviet airfields. Most of the Red aircraft were caught on the ground. German troops and tanks rolled into the Soviet Union over the full length of the frontier. Frantic calls for help from Red Army units under the hammer went unheeded in the chaos. One such plea received the famous response: "You must be insane. And why isn't your message in code?"

As reports poured in, Zhukov phoned Stalin, who was in his dacha (country house) outside Moscow. The phone rang and no one answered it. Zhukov let it ring. A duty officer answered, and finally Stalin came to the phone. Zhukov explained the situation and asked for permission to return fire. Stalin, numbed, said nothing. Zhukov asked: "Have you understood me?" Stalin said nothing.

Stalin remained muddled for hours, and the order to return fire was not issued until 07:15 AM. In the meantime, the Germans swept forward rapidly, overwhelming Soviet border units that had received no orders for dealing with the situation. Without orders, they could do nothing, for Stalin had eliminated nearly all officers who dared to take initiative on their own. Stalin was so unstrung that Molotov had to announce, later that day, the news of the invasion to the Soviet people: "Without any declaration of war, German troops have attacked our country, attacked our borders in many places, and bombed our cities with their aircraft."

Goebbels had read off a speech written by Hitler to the German people that morning, declaring in predictable style that war was required to "counter this conspiracy of the Jewish-Anglo-Saxon warmongers and the equally Jewish rulers of the Bolshevik headquarters in Moscow." The action was justified, Goebbels explained, because the Soviets had been planning to attack Germany. To be sure, had Stalin felt he had the capability he might well have taken on Hitler first, but as discussed the Red Army was in no condition to do so. Nazi apologists would later insist that the USSR was in fact planning to attack Germany, using a Red Army plan dated 15 May 1941 as evidence, but this was a defensive plan that simply considered the option of preemptive action in the face of an imminent German attack. Apparently when Zhukov presented the plan to Stalin, Koba had shot back: "Are you mad? Do you want to provoke the Germans?"

Soviet soldiers and civilians fled the invasion in panic, with refugees clogging roads and helping contribute to the confusion. Large numbers of troops surrendered without a real fight. Red Army units were in chaos, lacking clear orders, partly due to confusion at the top, partly due to the destruction of communications centers by Luftwaffe bombers, as well as sabotage by German Army infiltration teams and ethnic nationalist saboteurs who had been trained by the Germans.

In the first two days of the attack, the Luftwaffe destroyed roughly two thousand Soviet aircraft, many of them lined up neatly along the runways of air bases that were sited too far forward. They were easy targets for surprise attacks, with the Germans plastering the fields with fragmentation bombs and then strafing them for good measure.

Those pilots who did get off the ground were no match for the Luftwaffe. Although the Soviet Union had accelerated the development of more modern aircraft over the previous few years, the standard Red Air Force fighters were the barrel-shaped Polikarpovs, the biplane I-153 and monoplane I-16, both extremely maneuverable but outdated, much slower than the German Messerschmitt Bf-109 -- with the Luftwaffe now equipped with the much-improved Bf-109F variant. Soviet air-combat doctrine was equally behind the times. Soviet aircraft were shot down so easily that one Luftwaffe general termed it "infanticide". Even Reichsmarshal Hermann Goering, boss of the Luftwaffe, was incredulous at the numbers of Soviet aircraft destroyed, and ordered intelligence to perform a recount. The numbers came back bigger.

Fighting raged all up and down the frontier, but the heaviest blows were delivered by German Army Group Center, falling on three Soviet armies of the West Front and one army of the Northwest front. The immediate German strategy was to use infantry divisions to seal off Soviet forces in a salient centered on the border city of Bialystok, while panzer divisions expanded the enveloping movement deep into the Soviet Union towards Minsk, a key rail junction and on the main highway to Moscow.

Red Army leadership was ineffective in the face of this catastrophe. On the evening of 22 June, Defense Commissar Marshall Semyon Timoshenko sent an order from Moscow to the armies in the frontier regions to begin an immediate counteroffensive and sweep the enemy out of Soviet territory. In reality, these armies were being hard-pressed to survive and were in no condition to even think about offensive action. Soviet reserves were still being called up, and there was no overall operational plan. Protests were useless and few generals even bothered, leaving Moscow even more ignorant of the extent of the rapidly expanding disaster.

General Pavlov could only fall back on lessons learned in wargames conducted in January to perform counterattacks. With his supply system shattered, communications badly disrupted, and the Luftwaffe in complete control of the skies, his efforts accomplished nothing. On 27 June, German panzer divisions closed the ring in their envelopment maneuver, meeting near Minsk. Soviet forces inside the trap were doomed. The Germans had penetrated 320 kilometers (200 miles) into the USSR in only five days. They were a third of the way to Moscow.

The only thing that Moscow had done in response to the invasion was to set up a new command structure, in the form of a general headquarters organization known as the "Stavka", created on 22 June. The name was, interestingly, an old Tsarist term. Above that was the "State Defense Committee", known by its Russian acronym GOKO, which included Molotov, Beria, Voroshilov, and Georgy Malenkov. Of course, neither group had any capability, or for that matter desire, to defy Stalin, who could countermand their orders and bypass them as he liked.

* In the meantime, German Army Group North was pouring across the river Nemen. Soviet armor counterattacked, but within four days these forces had been encircled and destroyed. Other German forces had seized bridges intact over the Dvina at Dvinsk, by the subterfuge of sending Germans in captured Soviet trucks with the drivers in Red Army uniforms to grab on and hold until heavier German units arrived. There was no further natural obstacle to block the Germans in their drive on Leningrad, and Soviet defenses in their path were disorganized. However, much to the fury of Army Group North's panzer commanders, the tanks were told to stop and wait for the infantry units to catch up.

German Army Group South was not having the same good luck as the other two groups. Soviet commanders in the south had been able to react more effectively to the invasion, and Red Army units there were able to mount more substantial resistance, inflicting serious though not crippling casualties on the invaders. The Soviets also had many more tanks than the Army Group South. Stalin was also slowly beginning to understand that the USSR could afford to sacrifice land more easily than armies, and was starting to authorize withdrawals when he was convinced they were absolutely necessary.

Along with offensive thrusts by other forces, Army Group South's Panzer Group 1, with 600 tanks, penetrated rapidly towards the town of Brody. Five armored corps of the Soviet Southwest Front, with over a thousand tanks, counterattacked on 26 June, attempting to cut off Panzer Group 1 and link up at the town of Dubno. One of the Red Army corps commanders was told by a political commissar: "If you occupy Dubno by this evening, we will give you a medal. If you don't, we will shoot you."

The result was a furious battle that lasted for four days. In particular, German tank and antitank gun crews found the new heavy KV tank and the medium T-34 tank a nasty surprise; the KV was big and unreliable, somewhat more intimidating than effective for the moment -- the "KV" stood for "Kliment Voroshilov" -- but the T-34 was a force to be reckoned with. The standard German 37 millimeter antitank gun was ineffective, the shells simply glancing off. Unfortunately, the Soviets did not use their armor wisely, and the Germans were able to isolate these monsters and destroy them at close range. Worst of all, the Luftwaffe had total air supremacy and destroyed Soviet tanks at will.

Panzer Group 1 took a severe battering during the battles around Dubno but survived. In contrast, the main armored elements of the Red Army's Southwest Front were all but completely wiped out. After a week of victories, Hitler and the Wehrmacht had every reason to be pleased with themselves. Some predicted that Moscow would fall within two more weeks. Hitler crowed that "the Russians have lost the war." Much the same opinion was widespread in London and Washington.

[3.3] STALIN AGAINST THE ROPES / THE FALL OF SMOLENSK

* Stalin kept a low profile during these disasters. After a meeting with senior defense officials on 27 June, he simply commented, as modern accounts have it: "Lenin founded our state and now we've fucked it up!" -- and went into hiding at his dacha. He was incredulous to hear how the Nazi advance swept into Minsk in six days. Finally, on 29 June Molotov, Beria, and other members of the Politburo went to Stalin's dacha to confront him. When he saw them arrive, they only compounded his distress. Stalin only asked: "Why have you come?" -- an oddly passive remark for someone used to ordering others about.

Four years later, he confessed in surprising display of frankness to an aide that he thought that they had come to demand his resignation. Given the fear and hatred he had created, it is interesting if idle to speculate on quickly he would have been executed if he had resigned. However, no matter how great his sins, changing leadership in the face of an overwhelming disaster would only make things worse, all the more so because Stalin had eliminated all serious rivals who might take his place. To his great relief Molotov and the others merely pleaded with him to take charge of the GOKO, State Defense Committee. In effect, they asked him to wake up.

Stalin replied: "All right." The fact that the government underneath Koba had come to his door to plead with him to take charge of things seemed to snap Stalin out of his depression. Beria warned his colleagues that Stalin's change in mindset had an unpleasant downside: "We were witness to Stalin's moment of weakness and he will never forgive us for that. Don't forget it."

With a ray of sunlight shining through the gloom, however dimly, Stalin began to reassert his domineering personality. On 3 July, Stalin addressed the nation. He called on them as "brothers and sisters", something he had never done before and would never do again, and asked them to fight a "great patriotic war" against the treacherous fascist invader. He called on them to fight, to take everything away before the advance of the invader and destroy anything that couldn't be removed, leaving nothing but "scorched earth". He defiantly said that the enemy's "best divisions" and air fleets have already been destroyed, though it was an exaggeration.

Stalin delivered the speech in a tired fashion, breathing heavily and often stopping, but it helped kindle feelings of patriotism, and many would remember the address with warmth for the rest of their lives. Whatever Stalin's great faults, the Motherland had been invaded and that was unacceptable -- or at least unacceptable to many. In the Ukraine, citizens welcomed the invader as a liberator from Stalin's terrors. Ukrainians jeered at Soviet soldiers as they fled; Ukrainian women blessed German troops with crucifixes as they passed, and Ukrainian men pulled down and smashed statues of Lenin, or piled up images of Soviet leadership and burned them.

In the meantime, the Germans pushed east, towards Kiev, Smolensk, Leningrad. There was panic and chaos, with looting in the cities in the path of the advance. However, although Army Group Center had swallowed up huge Russian armies in front of Kiev, the surrounded Soviets fought on with unceasing stubbornness. German infantry had not moved quickly enough, the huge size of the encirclement spread German resources thin in any case, and many Soviet units had been able to escape. Those that remained were doomed, but they were managing to sap energy and momentum from the German advance, inflicting casualties and delaying the timetable for the offensive.

When the Germans finally stamped out resistance in the trap, they captured 290,000 Soviet prisoners and destroyed or captured 1,500 artillery pieces and 2,500 tanks. However, 250,000 troops managed to escape. Hitler was furious and blamed the panzer group leaders. The panzer group leaders were angry in turn because their tanks were used for mopping-up operations that could have been left to infantry, instead of rapid offensive thrusts.

To the north, the fortress city of Brest held out under incessant hammering by German artillery, with most of the garrison finally surrendering on 29 June after being smashed by Luftwaffe aircraft carrying heavy bombs. Even then, small pockets held out for several more weeks inside the fortress. One scrawled his testament on the walls: **THE GERMANS ARE INSIDE. I HAVE ONE HAND GRENADE LEFT. THEY SHALL NOT GET ME ALIVE. IVANOV.**

Even Hitler, who regarded Slavs as subhumans, was impressed, calling the defense a "heroic effort" that demonstrated what should be expected of German soldiers. Hitler visited the fortress with Mussolini as a morale-boosting effort for his troops, to acknowledge their ordeal in the battle.

* The invasion had yielded huge numbers of Soviet prisoners, but they were no particular burden to the Germans, since they were treated with a staggering level of indifference. They were penned into camps that generally consisted of little more than a open field surrounded by barbed wire, with no shelter and little food. Many would die of starvation, disease, and exposure. Many others would, in desperation, put on German uniforms to keep from starving. They were called "Hilfsfreiwillige (Volunteer Helpers)" or "Hiwis" for short, and served as laborers, guards, and in other secondary roles. Ironically, those who put on a Germany Army uniform were always described as "Cossacks" in the paperwork, no matter what their real ethnic derivation was. Hitler loathed the idea of putting Slavic untermensch in the ranks of his fighting forces, but Cossacks were racially acceptable -- and so Cossacks they all were.

Stalin was equally indifferent to the suffering of Soviet prisoners. The Soviet Union had not signed the Geneva Convention, and when the Germans sent feelers through Sweden to discuss treatment of prisoners according to the convention they were ignored. When Soviet prisoners who had survived were liberated years later, Stalin would not treat them like heroes.

* Stalin was busily returning to his normal form. The first matter to deal with was to find someone to take the blame for the shocking defeat in the west. General Pavlov, commander of the armies on the border, was arrested. He was accused of conspiring with the Germans, even though a week before the invasion he had asked permission to move his troops into defensive positions in the face of clear German preparations for an assault -- a request that was brusquely denied by Stalin.

Under interrogation, Pavlov conducted himself like a soldier, refusing to sign fake confessions, refusing to incriminate others. He was shot. Eight other senior officers were executed as well for "lack of resolve, panic mongering, disgraceful cowardice ... and fleeing in terror in the face of an impudent enemy." There was no acknowledgement of the confused leadership from the top, nor of the fact that the soldiers caught in the onslaught were criminally short of transport, weapons, elementary supplies and equipment, even lacking simple maps.

The cruelty was not completely senseless, however. It didn't take long for rumors, with absolute basis in fact, to filter back to Soviet troops that suggested surrendering to the Germans was not much of an option. The invaders were quick to shoot Communist officials and Jews, and the treatment others could expect at their hands might make being shot seem swift and merciful. Since Soviet authorities were making it clear that they weren't being much more merciful to those who fell back, the troops had little choice but to die fighting.

Still, it was not just desperation that led Red Army soldiers to often fight stubbornly to the death. Hitler's invasion was only the latest disaster in a land with a history characterized heavily by disasters, and it had bred a certain toughness into the people that was probably their greatest virtue. Even the Germans would come to respect the courage, if not always the skill, of Red Army soldiers.

* Stalin ordered that everything of value be destroyed or removed in front of the German advance. A massive industrial relocation effort went into action, with entire factories picked up and moved to the Urals in a matter of weeks.

The German panzers had paused for a week during mopping-up. Guderian chafed at the delay and disobeyed orders, sending his 2nd Panzer Group forward again on 7 July in the reasonable belief that success would grant forgiveness. Kluge went to Guderian's headquarters on 9 July and told him to stop, but Guderian insisted that it was too late to cancel the movement. After much argument, Kluge caved in, telling Guderian: "Your operations always hang by a thread!"

That thread seemed to be fraying. Guderian's tanks ran into rainstorms that turned roads into mud, bogging them down, and Soviet resistance was stiffening. The Soviets had blown bridges and planted mines, and since there were very few good roads such measures greatly inconvenienced German armor.

Army Group Center's drive from Minsk towards Smolensk led them to the old defenses of the Stalin Line, from which the Soviets organized a massive armored counterblow. The Soviets were unable to deal with German air superiority, and by 16 July, Guderian's panzers, advancing from the south, were in Smolensk. Guderian had won his gamble.

Unfortunately for Guderian, the Red Army was not completely encircled. The German 3rd Panzer Group to the north under General Hoth was slowed by swampy terrain and substantial Red Army resistance. The Germans were not able to completely close the trap until 26 July. While they captured over 100,000 Soviet soldiers, many more managed to escape.

In fact, the German offensive was becoming increasingly muddled and disorganized. Although German generals would later conveniently blame Hitler's interference in their plans as the root cause, in fact the situation was much of their own making. The generals argued among themselves, with Guderian proving downright insubordinate on occasion, and sometimes Hitler was forced to intervene just to resolve their disputes. Still, the accomplishments of the campaign so far had left them confident of ultimate victory.

* In the face of these new disasters, Stalin considered making another deal with Hitler, one in which his bargaining position was vastly poorer than it had been in August 1939.

Bulgaria was a German ally, and the Bulgarian ambassador to the USSR, Ivan Staminov, was close to the Soviet hierarchy. Pavel Sudoplatov, a senior NKVD agent who was one of Beria's chief lieutenants, even claimed Staminov was a Red agent. According to Sudoplatov, Beria ordered him to contact Staminov in secret and ask him to approach the Germans and ask them if they would stop their war against the USSR if they were handed over the Baltics, the Karelian Peninsula, the Ukraine, Belorussia, and so on. Beria warned Sudoplatov that the meeting was to be completely secret: if Sudoplatov said anything about it, he and his family would be executed. The whole story remains murky since it was buried under deep layers of secrecy, but it is said that Staminov was incredulous: "Even if you retreat to the Urals, you'll still win in the end!"

While Stalin considered caving in, he made sure that his own soldiers didn't think of doing the same by issuing Order Number 270 on 16 August 1941. Any officer or political official taken prisoner was effectively a traitor, and would be executed if he ever came back from captivity. Order Number 270 didn't stop there. If any soldiers were taken prisoner or deserted, their

relatives were liable to be arrested. If a soldier was blown to shreds or buried under rubble on the battlefield, he might be chalked up as a deserter, with his relatives suffering the consequences.

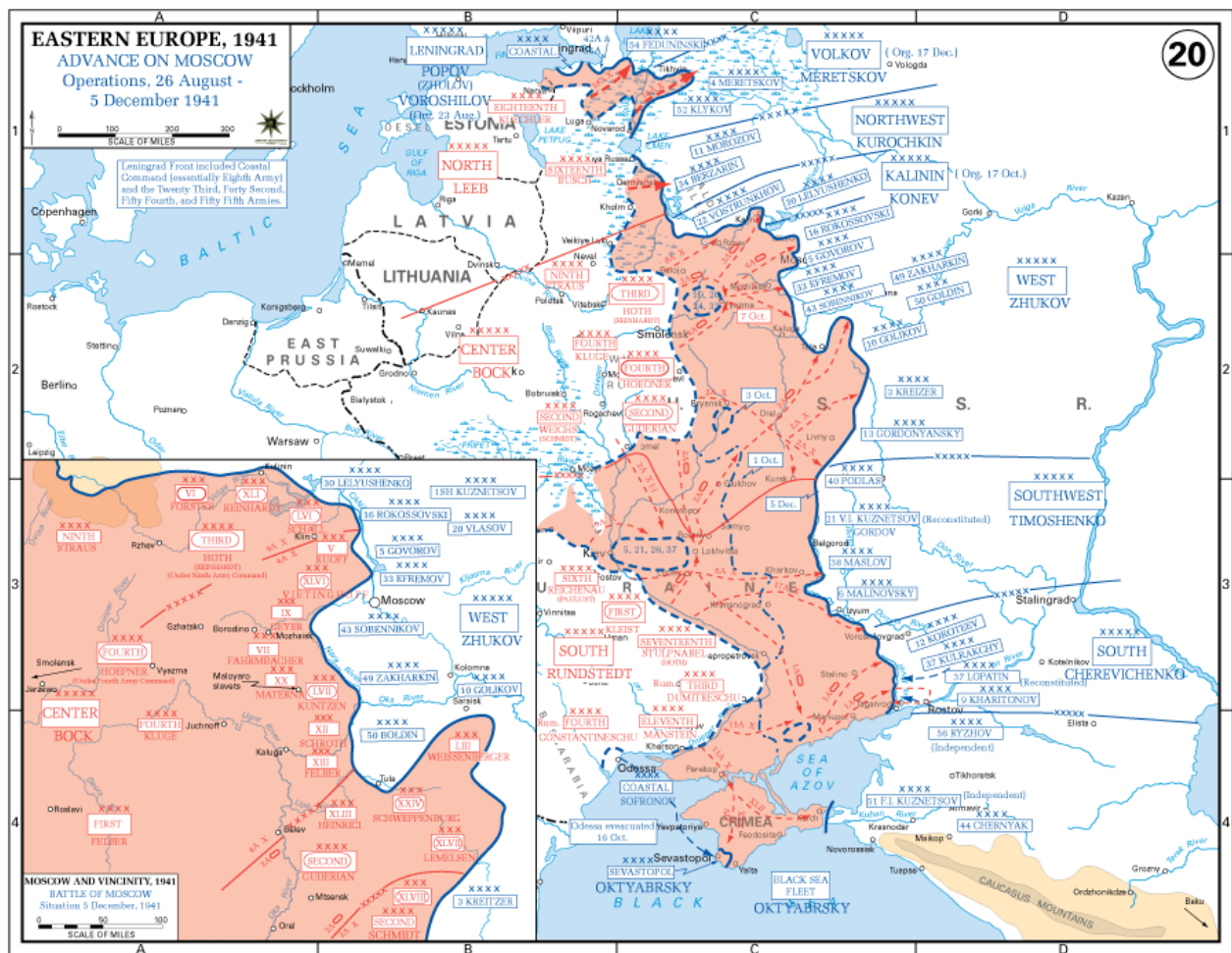
Stalin's own son, Senior Lieutenant Yakov Dzugashvili, was taken prisoner near Smolensk on 16 July 1941. The Nazis offered to exchange him, but Stalin simply replied that he had no son named Yakov. Stalin sent Yakov's wife Yulia, who was incidentally Jewish and so the target of her father-in-law's antisemitism, off to captivity in Siberia for two years. Ironically, Stalin's own regulations made him liable to arrest as well, but of course he was an exception to the rule.

Yakov would prove defiant and even heroic in his captivity, refusing to stand up if a German officer entered the room and turning his back on Germans who addressed him. He was placed in a punishment cell. After an escape attempt, he was sent off to a secret location. He died in April 1943. The popular story was that, fearing he could not hold out much longer, he threw himself on the wire of his prison camp and was shot. His actual fate remains mysterious. The Germans kept Yakov's death a secret, but Stalin, apparently impressed that his son had not made propaganda broadcasts for the Germans, relented and allowed Yulia to be returned to freedom, such as it was. In 1945, Stalin told Zhukov, giving Yakov a degree of respect that Stalin had never shown his son during the young man's life: "Yakov would prefer any kind of death to betraying the Motherland."

[4.0] The USSR Under Siege

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* In response to the Nazi invasion of the USSR, the British and Americans pledged to do all they could to help. Unfortunately for the Soviets, "all they could do" didn't amount to much for the time being. However, in the face of stubborn, if not always very well-planned, Red Army resistance, the invasion was slowing as German losses mounted and supply lines stretched. Still, by the middle of September 1941, the Nazis had captured Kiev in the south and had Leningrad under siege in the north, with vast tracts of the USSR under German control.



[4.1] THE WEST REACTS

* British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had long been an enemy of Bolshevism, having helped support White forces working against the Reds during the Russian Civil War two decades earlier. Churchill had never restrained his criticisms of Stalin and his ugly regime. However, on the evening before the invasion Churchill had announced to dinner guests that the USSR was going to be attacked, and declared that Britain and the United States should do everything to help the Soviets.

Later his private secretary, John Colville, asked him how he could make such an abrupt turnabout. Churchill replied: "I have one purpose, the destruction of Hitler, and my life is much simplified thereby. If Hitler invaded Hell I would make at least a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons."

The next day, the German invasion went forward on schedule, smashing through Soviet defenses. Churchill had been courting the Soviets for months, and though it had been an exercise in frustration, it had at least paid off in revealing to Stalin that the British had been telling the truth all along. The prime minister addressed the British nation, employing his gift for oratory to the fullest: "No one has been a more consistent opponent of Communism than I have for the last 25 years. I will unsay no word I have spoken about it. But all this fades away before the spectacle now unfolding."

Churchill knew there were those who thought letting the Red and Nazi predators bleed each other dry was to Britain's benefit. He disagreed, pointing out that once Hitler swallowed up the USSR, there would be nothing to prevent his final domination of Europe. Churchill concluded, with his dramatic command of the English language: "We will never parley with Hitler and any of his gang. We shall fight him by land, we shall fight him by sea, we shall fight him in the air, until with God's help, we have rid the earth of his shadow and liberated its peoples from his yoke. Any man or state who fights against Nazidom will have our aid."

US President Franklin Roosevelt was more cautious in speaking out, but Roosevelt felt that the United States should go to the aid of the Soviet Union. As Oscar Cox, one of the administration's staffers, put it in a memo to the president: "Our practical choice is clear: whether or not we like Russia's internal and other policies, we will aid Russia, in our national interest, to eliminate the far more immediate danger to our security from Hitler's already partially executed plans to rule the world."

The USA was already providing military assistance to the British under the "Lend-Lease" program, passed in March, in which the USA financially underwrote and shipped war material to the UK. Now the president wanted to similarly provide assistance to the Soviets, though at the outset they would have to pay for what they got. On 23 June, the US government added an American declaration of support for the USSR's struggle.

Roosevelt was aware that Stalin's rule was a tyranny, but the president's perception was that the Soviets were not particularly interested in far-flung conquests. As Roosevelt put it, a week after the invasion: "Now comes this Russian diversion. If it is more than just that, it will mean the liberation of Europe from Nazi domination -- and at the same time I do not think we need to worry about any possibility of Russian domination."

The citizens of the Baltic States might have disagreed with that assessment, and Roosevelt has long been criticised for what has been often judged his naivete about America's Soviet ally. In reality, Roosevelt had few sticks to use against the USSR and so he had little alternative but to rely on carrots. Certainly, no matter how troublesome the Soviets were, they were still killing Germans, and every German they killed was one less that America would eventually have to fight. If American weapons helped the Soviets kill even more Germans, or helped them kill so many Germans that America wouldn't have to fight at all, all the better -- and there was no sense in trying to use munitions shipments to squeeze the Kremlin.

Besides, Roosevelt saw the forced alliance between the USSR and the West as an opportunity to bring the Soviet Union out of its isolation to work as a partner in shaping the post-imperialist, post-colonialist world that he saw as following the war. In hindsight, Roosevelt was letting his inclination to the optimistic get the better of him, failing to grasp that Stalin was more thug than statesman. Still, for the time being there were plenty of justifications for America to take a soft line with the USSR.

However, all that Britain and America could provide for the moment was moral encouragement. Britain was slowly rebuilding strength after the disasters in the West during the spring of 1940, and America's mobilization for war was only then ramping up. There was also the problem of getting war material to the USSR, since shipping was in short supply and suffering from German U-boat attacks. Churchill judged that it would be impossible to deliver any serious quantity of supplies before mid-1942.

Many American conservatives and isolationists doubted that supporting a thug regime like Stalin's was a good idea, but the American Communist Party, having done an about-face to support Hitler when the Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed in 1939, did another about-face and joined the cry against Hitler. The British Communist Party was a bit slower to react but turned around on 25 June to support the war against Hitler. In the occupied countries of the Continent, Communist cadres began to ramp up resistance campaigns that would create substantial armies of partisan fighters.

* With the Soviet Union and Britain now faced with a common enemy, Stafford Cripps was much more welcome in the Kremlin and no longer had to put up with snubs. A British military mission, under the direction of General Noel Mason-MacFarlane, was sent to Moscow to back up Cripps, arriving on 27 June 1941. The British also had a very capable code-breaking effort, codenamed ULTRA, that was listening in on German communications in the East, and the British embassy was now passing on the intelligence from ULTRA to the Soviets. The exercise was codenamed VULTURE, with the source of the intelligence disguised.

However, dealings between the two supposed allies were not at all congenial; on 29 June, the Soviets simply handed Cripps an extensive list of military supplies required by the USSR from Britain, while they absolutely refused to share any real information with the military mission. As annoying as it was, the British did want to help, but there was little they could do over the short term. They did promise to provide more help in the future, signing an Anglo-Soviet military assistance pact on 12 July 1941.

The Soviets were not much more civil to the Americans. Stalin's ambassador to the USA, Konstantin Oumansky, was described by an American official as "insulting in his manner and speech", inclined to demand everything as if it was "a natural right", and protested all disagreements as if they were "heinous offenses." The Americans swallowed their annoyance as well. On 8 July, Oumansky had presented the US government with a huge "shopping list" that asked for thousands of aircraft, tens of thousands of anti-aircraft guns, and massive quantities of everything else. There was no way the request could be met over the short term, but Roosevelt wanted to at least reassure Stalin that the United States understood the gravity of Soviet Union's situation and was putting aid to the USSR high on the priority list.

On 27 July, Roosevelt sent his aide Harry Hopkins to Moscow. Hopkins was in charge of Lend-Lease for the moment and wanted to determine Soviet requirements. Hopkins spoke with Stalin in two sessions lasting a total of eight hours. Stalin spoke Russian to Hopkins in a flow, hardly bothering to allow the interpreter to keep up, detailing in fairly accurate terms the military situation and outlining what the United States needed to provide the USSR to help beat Hitler. Hopkins was particularly impressed with the fact that Stalin's shopping list included substantial requests for tooling and materials. Had the Soviets believed they were in danger of immediate defeat, they would have just wanted weapons they could immediately put into the fight, but it was clear Stalin was thinking in terms of a protracted war.

On receiving feedback from the sessions, in early August Roosevelt discussed the matter with his cabinet. The president was highly emphatic, even angry at times, insisting that everything needed to be done to help the Soviets and that bureaucratic obstacles needed to be kicked down. In the aftermath, Oumansky was given further assurances that the commitment of the US government to support the Soviet cause was dead serious. The truth of that was demonstrated by the fact that Roosevelt was then pushing hard for the US to pick up the bill for aid to the USSR by bringing the Soviets into the Lend-Lease program; the appropriate legislation would be passed in September.

However, given the staggering disasters suffered by the Red Army over the previous month, few in London or Washington were confident that the Soviet Union would survive no matter what was done. That made no difference. Even if the Hitler won, his victory would have to be made as expensive as possible. Altruistic or cynical, either way the logic behind military aid to the USSR was hard to argue with.

In the meantime, Hopkins was returning from Moscow to personally brief the president. He made his way to Newfoundland, where Roosevelt and Churchill engaged in their first face-to-face meeting of the war, devising the "Atlantic Charter", which was signed on 14 August. The Atlantic Charter stated that the US and Britain had no territorial ambitions in the conflict with

Hitler, and outlined the principles on which the postwar world would hopefully be run. The Soviets publicly endorsed the charter, though Stalin was privately disgusted. The whole exercise seemed abstract, even flippant, while the USSR was fighting for its life, and the US and Britain had announced war aims and policies without consulting him. To reassure Stalin, steps were taken at the Atlantic Charter meeting towards three-way talks.

[4.2] THE ANGLO-SOVIET OCCUPATION OF IRAN

* The British might not have been able to provide much in the way of weapons for the moment, but they quickly demonstrated that they were in dead earnest. The British were aware that there were German agents in Iran and suspected that the country's ruler, Reza Shah Pahlavi Kabir, was sympathetic to the Nazi cause. The British had a refinery at Abadan, at the north end of the Persian Gulf, which provided a port from which supplies could be offloaded and then shipped by rail north to the USSR. If the Shah went over to the Germans that connection would be cut, and the Germans would have control over Iran's oilfields.

The Shah was given pointed suggestions that he get rid of the German agents but on 21 August he replied with a refusal, citing his nation's neutrality. The British and the Soviets then secretly agreed to invade Iran. Britain had a division of Indian troops near Abadan and armored units elsewhere in the area, while the Soviets had forces in Azerbaijan, in the USSR north of Iran. On 25 August, citing threats to Iranian security from German agents, the British and the Soviets informed the Iranian government that Iran was to be occupied.

So it was done. British and Soviet forces joined hands after three days of movement from south and north against ineffective resistance, and Iranian forces surrendered.

* The Iranian connection to the USSR was now secure. Churchill was not a remorseless monster like Stalin, but he was perfectly capable of ruthlessness and had demonstrated it. Stalin no doubt admired this. That did not mean that Stalin was softening his demands for more help from the British and the Americans. The Soviet ambassador to Britain, Ivan Maisky, pressed the British government for more action. Maisky met with Churchill personally on 4 September to present the Soviet Union's demands.

Churchill found the demands annoying. Stalin was acting as though the USSR was doing Britain a great favor by simply fighting for survival. It could be argued that it was, and certainly British citizens understood that the Luftwaffe bombers that had been pounding Britain's cities at night since the fall of 1940 had turned their unwelcome attentions elsewhere. On the other hand, the Soviets had a fight on their hands whether they liked it or not, and the British were doing what they could to help, in spite of the fact that the Soviet Union had reacted with "stony composure", as Churchill had put it, when nations in the West were overrun by the Nazis.

Churchill, not noted for a mild temper, grew hot at Maisky and shot back at him: "Remember that only four months ago we in this Island did not know whether you were coming in against us on the German side. Indeed we thought it quite likely that you would. Even then we felt sure we

would win in the end. We never thought that our survival was dependent on your action either way. Whatever happens, and whatever you do, you of all people have no right to make reproaches of us."

Maisky, confronted with a snarling bulldog, backed up: "More calm, please, my dear Mr. Churchill!" Maisky would not change the message, but he was more tactful about it in the future. Churchill did send a message to Stalin that material assistance was on the way, but in response to Stalin's demands for a landing in France, the prime minister pointed out that half-baked British military actions that were certain to end in defeat even if they could be performed at all would help Hitler more than they would Stalin. The most Churchill's senior military advisors could recommend were deception operations, sham invasion plans to make the Germans keep forces in the West. Churchill did take a personal interest in making sure that the Soviets were kept up to date on the latest ULTRA intelligence, but that did little to make Stalin happy.

* At the end of September, representatives of Britain and the US went to Moscow to talk with Stalin, as per the arrangement set up at the Atlantic Charter meeting. Churchill sent Lord Beaverbrook, the minister of supply, and Roosevelt sent Averell Harriman, his special envoy to Britain.

The two men spoke with Stalin for three days. The first day's session was agreeable enough, with Stalin briefing his visitors on the military situation. However, the next day, Stalin was fidgety, strained, and nervous. Things were not going well at the front, it seemed, and Stalin interrupted the talks several times to make phone calls. That evening, he was brusque with his guests, "much dissatisfied with what we were offering", as Harriman put it.

The final session, conducted the next evening went much better. Beaverbrook and Harriman agreed to massive shipments of planes, tanks, guns, trucks, jeeps, destroyers, food, raw materials, and hundreds of thousand of boots. Beaverbrook reported that at the end Stalin beamed like "sunshine after rain." Visitors would eventually find this a typical pattern in meetings with Stalin: first agreeable, then hostile, then agreeable again, as if Koba was conducting a one-man "hard-cop soft-cop" act.

The shipments were to begin immediately, but of course such an enormous effort couldn't get off the ground quickly. In the meantime, the Soviet Union was more or less on its own, with Stalin bitterly complaining to his cronies that the British and Americans were deliberately throwing the USSR to the German wolf.

[4.3] THE INVASION SLOWS / THE CAPTURE OF KIEV

* By the end of July 1941, despite their remarkable victories, German commanders and even Hitler himself were beginning to realize that their intelligence had grossly underestimated Soviet strength. Although the Germans had taken hundreds of thousands of prisoners, the Red Army seemed to have an endless supply of replacements. Even when surrounded, Soviet troops often fought on when they knew their situation was completely hopeless, and some Soviet fighter

pilots, knowing they were outclassed, took to ramming German bombers -- and remarkably sometimes even survived. Stories made the rounds among German troops that the Soviets actually trained dogs carrying explosive charges to run under German tanks and blow them up. It is still argued whether this was actually done, but given the determination if not the skill of Soviet resistance, German troops found it easy to believe.

The Germans had lost hundreds of thousands of men, with a good fraction of them killed. These were severe casualties by any standards, and the only compensation was the Red Army had suffered far worse. Even ignoring combat losses and damage, maintaining such a huge operation, particularly in the primitive field conditions in the Soviet Union, meant a lot of wear and tear, and an increasing degree of simple exhaustion. Furthermore, although the original German plan had suggested that supply problems could be reduced by "living off the land", the Soviets were becoming increasingly efficient at ensuring that all that was left on the land were cinders and ashes, increasing German logistical requirements and effort.

On 4 August, Hitler flew to Army Group Center's headquarters in Borisov, east of Minsk. The offensive seemed to be dragging on, and so Hitler decided that the focus needed to be shifted on the USSR's economic assets. This meant increasing the pressure to the south, to seize the oil fields of the Caucasus, and to the north, to take Leningrad. This would undermine the Soviet ability to make war and provide resources for the German war machine. In addition, Hitler had a perfectly sensible concern that his offensive spearheads were too far out on a limb logistically and vulnerable to attack on the flanks.

On arrival, Hitler informed Field Marshal von Bock that he was to halt his drive towards Moscow, and that the panzers of Army Group Center were to be used to support a drive by Army Group South to capture the Ukraine, with smaller forces diverted to support Army Groups North's push on Leningrad. Panzer Generals Guderian and Hoth protested loudly. Moscow was only 320 kilometers (200 miles) away, and most of the Red Army was defending the city. Once the Red Army was destroyed, the rest of the USSR might well fall with the city. Guderian flew to Berlin on 23 August to argue for a continued drive on Moscow. The Fuehrer heard him out, then went on at length about the economic need to seize the Ukraine and the Caucasus region. Senior staff officers present said nothing to contradict Hitler, and Guderian left the meeting empty-handed.

* By mid-July, Army Group South had advanced deep into the Ukraine, performing an encirclement of three Soviet armies around Uman, south of Kiev, in the process. The Germans wiped out the pocket in early August, taking more than 100,000 prisoners. Guderian's panzer group was then shifted south to assist in the capture of Kiev itself. By the end of August, the Red Army had moved to a line west of the Dnieper, though the Soviets held on to Kiev on the east shore of the river and to Odessa, on the northwest corner of the Black Sea, which could in principle be supported by sea. By this time, the Luftwaffe was range of Moscow and was hammering the city. Citizens hid in the subway.

Although Stalin was no military strategist, he was arrogant and ignored the advice of his generals, many of whom were very competent. Following Stalin's misguided orders, the Red Army continued to suffer reverses. With German Army Group South moving to trap Red Army

forces in Kiev, Zhukov suggested to Stalin that Red Army forces there were threatened with encirclement and suggested they withdraw to a more defensible line. Stalin replied that the suggestion was "rubbish". He did not want to give up Kiev and still thought he had a choice in the matter. Zhukov submitted his resignation as chief of staff; Stalin accepted it.

Similarly, on 11 September Marshal Budyenny, commander of the Soviet Southwestern Front, requested permission to withdraw from Kiev and escape the trap. Stalin refused, but he did order Budyenny to return to Moscow. Budyenny was an old crony of Stalin, one of Voroshilov's lieutenants from Civil War days, a fun-loving, virile man with a huge mustache who looked like a romantic bandit and had something of the personality of one. Stalin was particularly fond of him; Stalin may have also begun to wonder, with good reason, if his old buddies were particularly effective generals and that they shouldn't be in charge of frontline armies. In any case, Stalin ordered Colonel-General Mikhail Kirponos to take Budyenny's place.

At the end of August and the first two weeks of September, the Germans encircled Kiev, linking up well behind the city on 16 September. Stalin granted permission to withdraw on 17 September, but the trap had snapped shut, and though the Red Army troops inside the trap fought desperately to break out, few succeeded. Kirponos was killed in action, which was just as well considering the alternatives.

Four Soviet armies were completely destroyed. Kiev itself fell on 26 September 1941, with the Germans claiming the capture of over 600,000 soldiers. With such losses, the Red Army no longer outnumbered the Germans and there were no more reserves. By 24 October, German Army Group South was in Karhkov, a major industrial center in the Ukraine; by the end of October the Germans were in the Crimea, and by the end of November they had seized most of the peninsula except for the fortress city Sevastopol; and on November 20 the Germans entered Rostov-on-Don.

[4.4] LENINGRAD ISOLATED

* In the meantime, on 8 August, Field Marshal Von Leeb's Army Group North, supported by armor from Army Group Center, renewed its offensive towards Leningrad. By the end of August, Army Group North was within 48 kilometers (30 miles) of the city. Simultaneously, the Finns pushed the Red Army back in offensives to the north and south of Lake Ladoga, reclaiming the territory lost in the Winter War. However, the Germans would find them reluctant to do much more than that.

The only delay in the German offensive was due to the stubborn resistance of isolated Red Army units in Tallinn, in Estonia. The Soviets held out in Tallinn for a month and then tried to evacuate by sea. They were hit hard by the Luftwaffe and German artillery, which sank 16 warships and 34 transports.

On 8 September, Army Group North had sealed off the land approaches to Leningrad. The Germans had been bombarding the city with artillery since 4 September, and on 6 September the

Luftwaffe bombed Leningrad as well, causing great damage and in particular burning down a major food depot. Stalin concluded that the Soviet commander in Leningrad, his old friend Voroshilov, was not up to the task of defending the city. Zhukov was called to the Kremlin, where Stalin congratulated him on the competence he had showed fighting the Germans, and then asked: "Where will you be off to now?"

"Back to the front."

"Which front?" Stalin asked, indulging his inclination to toy with people. Zhukov was only startled for a moment and shot back: "The one you consider necessary."

"Then go to Leningrad. It is in an almost hopeless situation." Zhukov flew into the city the next day, 9 September, his plane evading German fighters. Zhukov's irritation at being attacked was aggravated when the guards at the headquarters for the Leningrad Front refused to let him in since he lacked a pass. Zhukov had to swallow his annoyance -- Red Army soldiers were trained to do what they were told without question, and the regulations applied to Zhukov as they did to everyone else. He had to wait 15 minutes to be granted admission.

Zhukov went to Voroshilov and presented him with a note from Stalin, which read: "Hand over the command of the Front to Zhukov and fly to Moscow immediately." Zhukov sent Voroshilov away curtly and proceeded to terrorize the generals who had been fumbling the defense of the city, sacking one on the spot. Voroshilov went back to Moscow, expecting to get a bullet in his head, but Stalin was fond of Voroshilov and spared him.

Zhukov mobilized the citizens of Leningrad to fight. Voroshilov had ordered the Baltic fleet to be scuttled. Zhukov rescinded the order and had the warships turn their big guns on the Germans to pound them at long range. Voroshilov had ordered factories rigged for destruction; Zhukov had them returned to production of war materiel. On 17 September, he sent out an order to his officers saying that any retreat would be punishable by death.

With the city isolated, however, it was no longer practical to evacuate those who could not contribute to its defense, such as children and the old. There would be a terrible price to pay for this failure.

[5.0] The Soviets Stand Fast

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* Hitler had never planned on a long campaign in the USSR; as the fighting continued into the fall of 1941, Wehrmacht forces were finding themselves falling behind schedule and confronted with mounting difficulties, particularly since the Germans lacked winter gear. Despite the difficulties, the Nazis performed a drive on Moscow, codenamed Operation TYPHOON -- but by December 1941, the offensive had run out of steam, and the Red Army struck back hard, throwing the Wehrmacht back from the gates of Moscow.

[5.1] THE BATTLE FOR MOSCOW

* Although the Germans put siege to Leningrad, they did not press the attack, since Hitler had changed his mind about its capture. The city had been isolated and he felt there was no reason to waste his troops. Leningrad could be pounded into rubble with shelling and bombing, and left to starve; it would fall into his hands in time. Hitler would then wipe it from the face of the earth and turn the land over to the Finns.

Having successfully secured his flanks, and in particular emboldened by the tremendous German victory at Kiev, Hitler now ordered Army Group North's panzers to be redirected to renew the drive on Moscow. In late September, Zhukov received reports that German tanks were being loaded up on railway flatcars and shunted in the direction of Moscow. He thought this was a deception exercise at first, but within days Red Army troops in front of Moscow were reporting the arrival of German armor from the north.

As with Leningrad, Hitler wanted Moscow completely destroyed, erased from history. On its site, he planned to create an artificial lake. The final drive on Moscow, codenamed Operation TYPHOON, began on 2 October 1941, after the efforts in the north and south wound down. Guderian's panzers shifted north from their excursion into the Ukraine, and made rapid progress at first. Hitler wanted to encircle Moscow and bag all the Red forces defending it. The German offensive ran along a huge front 640 kilometers (400 miles) wide. The attack was conducted by 14 panzer divisions and 74 infantry divisions, totalling 1.8 million German soldiers. The Red Army could field 800,000 men in 83 divisions to defend Moscow, but only 25 of these divisions were fully effective, and the Soviets were desperately short of aircraft and armor.

General Ivan Konev was commander of the Red Army's West Front and had to face the onslaught. By 7 October, the Germans were beginning encirclements of Soviet Western Front and Reserve Front concentrations in the region. The Germans took 660,000 prisoners at Vyazma, for a total loss of three million men since the beginning of the campaign. A German general wrote with satisfaction: "Each night the villages went on burning, coloring the low clouds with blood-red light."

Stalin had once again created a disaster by refusing to let Red Army units withdraw and escape capture. Now that things had become desperate, he was finally more willing to listen to his generals. He called Georgy Zhukov, still in charge of the defense of Leningrad, to come to the Kremlin on 5 October. Zhukov left his aide Ivan Fedyuninsky in charge in Leningrad and flew to Moscow on 7 October. Stalin briefed him on the situation and ordered Zhukov to go to West Front Headquarters to sort things out.

The next day, Zhukov reported to Stalin that there was nothing standing in the way of the Germans and Moscow. The situation was very serious. The only positive news, if it could be called that, was that the Germans were still preoccupied with the destruction of Soviet troops they had encircled at Vyazma.

On 10 October, Stalin ordered Zhukov to take command of the combined fronts and relieve Konev. Stalin said that Konev would be handed over to a revolutionary tribunal, which meant that almost certainly he would be shot as a scapegoat. Zhukov claimed later that he replied bluntly: "Pavlov was shot, but that changed nothing. The situation at the front didn't improve. Therefore, I don't recommend you to do the same to Konev. He is an immensely experienced and clever man, strong willed and capable of establishing order. I request that you appoint him as my deputy."

The request was granted. Zhukov now focused on the immediate problem of saving Moscow. He had only about 90,000 men, all that was left of 800,000 that had been available before the beginning of TYPHOON. Zhukov mobilized the citizens of Moscow to build defenses. He formed citizens' militias from students, older men, and disabled men. They would be sent into combat with little training, to be thrown under the tracks of the German drive. Few of them would survive.

On 13 October, the Germans broke through the final major Soviet defense line in front of Moscow. On 14 October, the Germans were at Podolsk, 48 kilometers (30 miles) from Moscow. A unit of officer cadets, many only teenagers, managed to slow them down for a few vital hours. All the cadets were killed. On 16 October, the Soviet diplomatic corps in Moscow abandoned the capital to head for Kubyshev on the Volga, 640 kilometers (400 miles) to the east. Although Stalin had a bunker built in Kubyshev, after receiving assurances from Zhukov that the city could be held, Koba decided to not leave Moscow. He undoubtedly did not want to face the humiliation of being chased out of town.

However, the flight of the bureaucrats led to panic among the citizenry. Police authority had all but disintegrated, there was looting, and the railway stations were clogged with civilians. The panic died down when the radio announced on 18 October that Stalin was still in the capital, and on 20 October Stalin imposed martial law. Troublemakers, or for that matter anyone who didn't do as ordered promptly or dared to talk back, would of course be shot on the spot.

On the front to the west, the soldiers continued to fight stubbornly. On the road to Moscow, General Pavlov performed a valiant last stand, and 28 of his men stopped 50 German tanks. Pavlov had been informed by Zhukov that he would be shot if he let the Germans through.

Near the end of October, Stalin paid a tentative visit to the front. His armored car bogged down in the mud about halfway there, and as it was getting dark, he decided he'd seen enough and took another car back to Moscow. Despite this faint-hearted effort, after his pathetic collapse at the beginning of the invasion, he was now demonstrating an admirable resolve, as well as his customary ruthlessness. In late October, he asked a city military commander what the plans were for the annual military parades to celebrate the anniversary of the revolution. The officer was astounded that Stalin would consider a parade when it seemed that Moscow would soon fall to the Germans, and raised objections: "But what if the Germans break through and bomb the parade, Comrade Stalin?"

Stalin replied: "Clear away the dead and wounded and continue with the parade."

The night before the parade, Stalin addressed the Soviet people from a subway station to rally them once more to the cause. He poured contempt on Hitler's belief that the Slavs were "untermenschen", born slaves, replying: "And it is these people without honor or conscience, these people with the morality of animals, who have the effrontery to call for the extermination of the Great Russian Nation -- the nation of Plekhanov and Lenin, of Belinsky and Chernyshevsky, of Pushkin and Tolstoy, of Gorky and Chekhov, of Glinka and Tchaikovsky."

The German invasion was not merely an injury -- it was an *insult*, an expression of contempt for the peoples of the Soviet Union. Stalin proclaimed: "If they want a war of extermination, they shall have one!" The defiant tone of the speech went over well in Britain and the United States.

The parade went ahead the next day, 7 November. Fighter squadrons were on alert to deal with any Luftwaffe intruders that might attack the parade, and medical emergency teams were standing by to deal with any casualties. Fortunately, it snowed that day and the parade went forward without the slightest hindrance from the Germans. Stalin spoke to the troops, expressing his conviction that the Germans were strained to the utmost and would quickly collapse. Although the event was to commemorate the Revolution, he called out to the troops by invoking the great heroes of Russia's imperial past. Socialism wasn't enough to motivate people to fight. Stalin had to appeal to their patriotism. Some of the soldiers in the audience were not so convinced, but that didn't matter. They were immediately marched off to the front lines to fight.

* In the meantime, the German advance had been slowing as the weather continued to get nastier. They were now trying to drive their tanks forward through snow, sleet, and mud, on primitive roads. German forces were at the end of a very long and tenuous supply line in steadily worsening weather, and had little equipment or training in winter fighting. Guderian had requisitioned winter clothing in October, only to be reprimanded. Soon winter clothing would be sent forward through the supply network, but it remained stockpiled in depots in the rear. The primitive supply network was overloaded and ammunition took priority.

On 31 October, the German high command had to order a pause to the advance, which was moving at a snail's pace anyway. The Soviets used the pause to rebuild their forces with astonishing speed, but the pause was short-lived. The weather turned to ice and snow, making the ground solid enough to permit movement of tanks, and on 15 November the Germans moved forward again, with pincers driving north and south to encircle Moscow and deal the Red Army

the final killing blow. However, Guderian's panzer group, moving up from the southwest, found itself blocked by stubborn Soviet resistance. On 27 November, the Red Army made a limited counterstroke against Guderian's forces in a well-organized and well-equipped attack and halted Guderian's drive on the city.

The German effort to circle the north of Moscow had better luck. On 2 December, German advance units reached Krasnaya Polyana, 21 kilometers (17 miles) from the center of Moscow, finally being blocked by antitank obstacles built by the citizens of Moscow. The Germans were now in a position to shell the city with long-range artillery.

On the evening of 2 December, General Rokossovsky received a call on the "special line" from Stalin. The situation was "very difficult", as Rokossovsky recollected after the war, and it was unlikely that Comrade Stalin was calling to have a pleasant chat. Rokossovsky picked up the phone "with some trepidation." Stalin asked him directly: "Are you aware, Comrade Commander, that the enemy has occupied Krasnaya Polyana, and are you aware that if Krasnaya Polyana is occupied, it means that the Germans can bombard any point in the city of Moscow?"

At dawn, the Russians counterattacked the Germans at Krasnaya Polyana and drove them out. The Germans left behind a pair of 300 millimeter heavy guns that they had been setting up to begin shelling the city.

Stalin was in fact doing a great deal of micro-managing, at one point ordering Zhukov and other senior officers to personally go and evict the Germans from a small village named Dedovo. The brass showed up, thoroughly startling the officers on the line, and sent in a tank and a company of infantry to drive out a platoon of Germans. The whole thing was entirely silly, but Zhukov admitted later: "Stalin must be given his due. By his harsh and unscrupulous attitude he was able to achieve the well-nigh impossible."

Stalin was helped a great deal by the weather. December brought blizzards and depths of cold few Germans were familiar with. Weapons froze up and men suffered from frostbite and disease, adding to the hundreds of thousands of German soldiers on the casualty lists. The Luftwaffe found itself grounded in the severe weather, but the Red Air Force seemed to only increase its activities. Although the Fuehrer demanded that the drive on Moscow be continued, as winter tightened its grip commanders in the front line were acknowledging reality and setting up for the defensive.

Runstedt's forces had seized Rostov in the south on 19 November in a driving snowstorm, but his troops were overextended, and counterattacks by Timoshenko's troops forced the Germans to withdraw. Hitler was angry at Runstedt for withdrawing, the Fuehrer never having seen any of his troops in a major retreat before. Runstedt submitted his resignation on 30 November and Hitler accepted it the next day, 1 December, though the Fuehrer tried to soften the action by announcing his removal from command as a "sick leave" and giving him a birthday gift of 250,000 marks a few weeks later.

Runstedt's replacement was Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, previously commander of the 6th Army, a macho bulldog of a man with a perpetually furious expression who the aristocratic

Rundstedt found crude and overbearing. Command of the 6th Army went to Reichenau's chief of staff, Friedrich Paulus. Hitler thought that Reichenau would turn things around, but Reichenau almost immediately reported that the situation was impossible and that the withdrawal had to continue.

The Fuehrer, agitated, flew to Poltava in the Ukraine on 3 December to find out what was going on. He was quickly told General Sepp Dietrich that the decision to withdraw had been correct. Dietrich was commander of the Leibstandarte Division of the Waffen SS -- the combat arm of the Nazi Party SS organization, which was under Wehrmacht operational control though the SS was personally loyal to the Hitler -- and was a longtime hardcore Nazi. Hitler had a high opinion of him, and to find that even Dietrich believed retreat had been necessary was something of a shock. The Fuehrer's composure was going to be further shaken over the next few weeks.

[5.2] THE AGONY OF LENINGRAD

* To the north, Hitler ordered the German Army and the Luftwaffe to pound Leningrad to rubble, rather than send German troops to be ground up in Soviet defenses. The Nazis bombarded the city relentlessly.

As the northern weather went cold and icy, Leningrad began to slowly die. Less than half the food needed to keep the citizenry alive was coming in. In mid-October, the authorities conducted a check of citizen's ration cards and tightened up control of the rationing. A woman who worked at a printing shop that produced ration cards was found with a hundred ration cards in her possession. She was immediately shot.

The citizens had no fuel. They burned all their possessions to stay warm. By late November, food rations had shrunk to what would prove to be an all-time low. A citizen received a handful of bread that tasted of sawdust. People ate paste, shoes, birds, mice, soups made from stinging nettles, anything they could find. Household pets disappeared quickly, their masters weeping as they killed the animals and then ate them.

The city had been flooded with refugees when the Germans closed in on it, and many had no papers. No papers meant no ration card. The refugees started starving in their camps outside the city as early as September, and all in the camps would eventually die. By the onset of winter, people were dropping in the streets, their frozen bodies left unattended until the authorities periodically picked them up and dumped them into mass graves all over the city. Eventually, the lack of resources to dig graves forced the authorities to begin cremating the bodies.

Although Soviet authorities kept it a secret for decades, some of the citizens turned to cannibalism, and a few of them murdered to obtain bodies when corpses were not conveniently available. Soldiers coming back from the front heard stories of some of their fellows being killed and eaten and began to travel in armed groups. The authorities recorded about 1,500 cannibals. Most were women who were trying to save their children.

The Soviets had been able to sneak some supplies across Lake Ladoga to the east, with the material delivered by train to a railhead at Tikhvin and then shuttled over the lake by barge in the dark. The Germans seized Tikhvin on 9 November, shutting down the last direct connection between the city and the outside world.

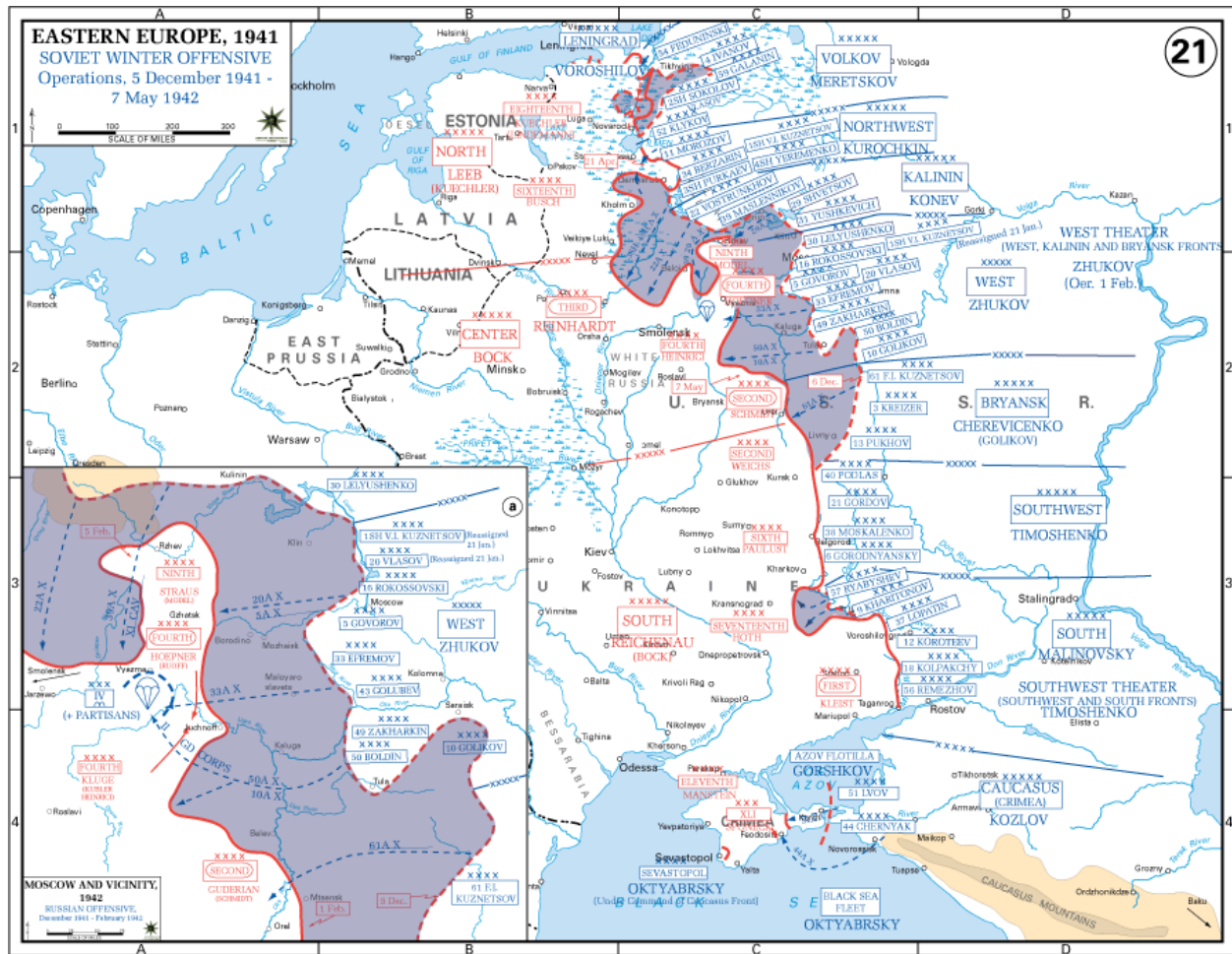
In late November, the ice on Lake Ladoga became thick enough to support sleds and then trucks, but without a railhead to the lake there was no way to provide the trucks with adequate loads of food. The Red Army recaptured Tikhvin on 9 December, as part of a general offensive of which more is said later, but of course the Germans thoroughly wrecked everything when they left. It most of the rest of the month to get the railroad back in working order. Supplies wouldn't start to flow until January and it would take several months to bring them up to the needed level.

In the meantime, the citizens continued to starve and die. Defiantly, the people went on with their lives as best they could. Historians performed their studies, architects designed new structures, and composer Dmitri Shostakovich wrote the LENINGRAD SYMPHONY. The symphony was performed in the city, with musicians recalled from the front to play. The conductor was faced with a difficult rehearsals, as musicians died of starvation every day. A quarter of a century later, the first night performance was reenacted by the survivors of the orchestra and the audience. Musical instruments were placed in the empty chairs of the dead of the symphony.

Even children made their own contribution to this great and appalling story. A young girl, Tania Savicheva, kept a diary to record life and death under the siege, listing calamities in a simple fashion: "Grandmother died, 25 January 1942, at 3:00 PM." Following pages list death after death, and conclude: "The Savichevas have died. All died. Only Tania is left." The girl was evacuated, but was too malnourished to survive. Her diary was read by Soviet prosecutors at the Nuremburg trials of Nazi leaders after the war.

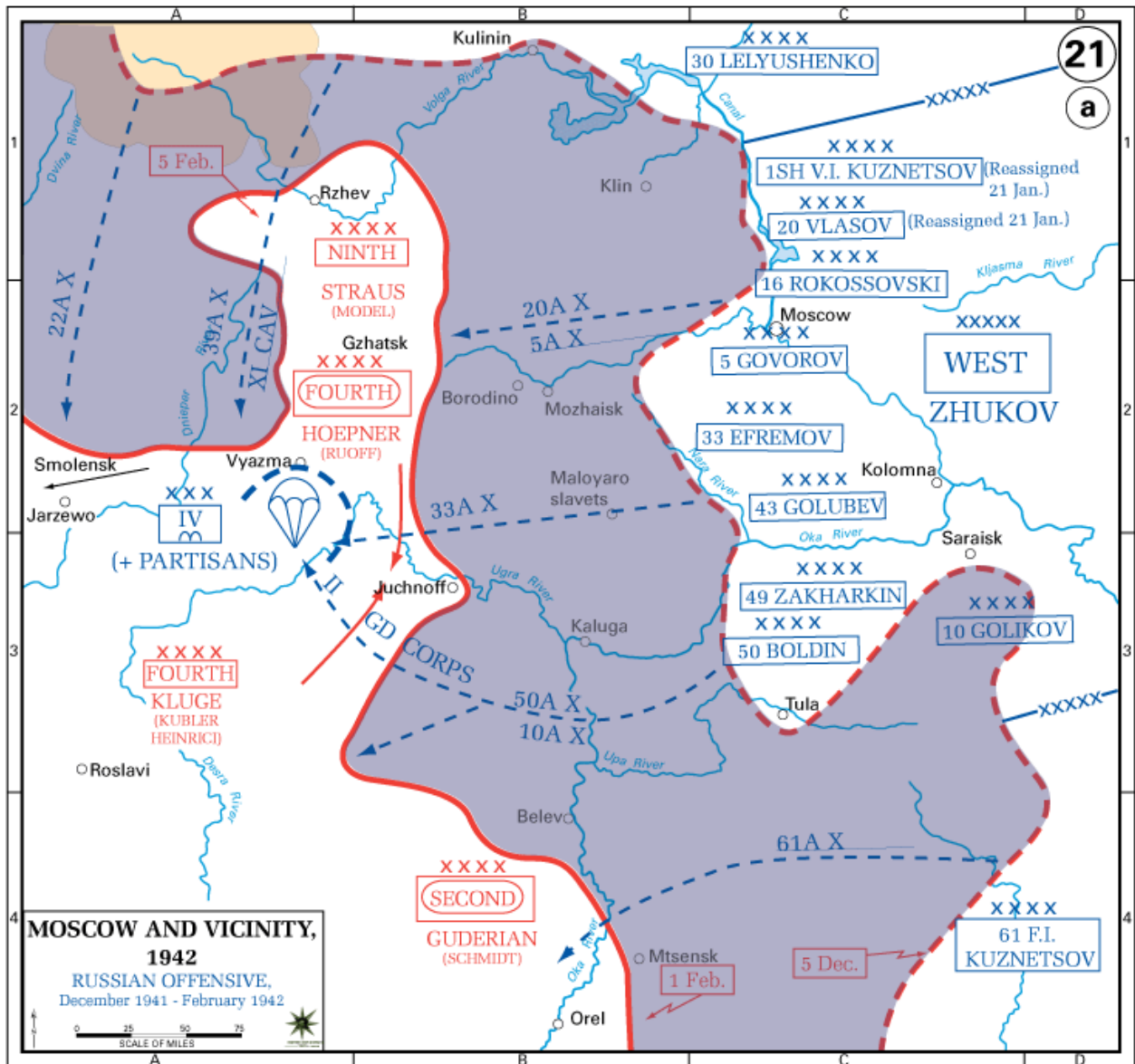
Leningrad would suffer siege for 900 days in all, but the first winter was the worst. It wasn't until March that the supply line was fully operational. The boats brought in food and took out noncombatants, dealing with Luftwaffe attacks as best they could. A pipeline and power line were laid across Lake Ladoga to keep the city operational. Survivors planted crops anyplace there was to plant them, and by the summer rations wouldn't be a particular problem. Nobody knows exactly how many people died in that hideous winter in Leningrad, but estimates are on the order of two million.

[5.3] COUNTERSTROKE



* As the Germans pushed through the snow towards Moscow in early December, the Soviets were preparing a counterstroke. Red agent Richard Sorge at the German embassy in Tokyo provided intelligence that the Japanese were not preparing to attack the Soviet Union from Manchukuo. Sorge had reported German preparations for BARBAROSSA back in June and had been ignored, but now Stalin believed him. Stalin withdrew more than half of the USSR's combat strength from Siberia, shuttling 40 divisions west to deal with the Nazis. These divisions were well trained, experienced, well equipped, and their officer corps had not been badly damaged by the purges. They had a thousand tanks and a thousand aircraft. They had already given Guderian a taste of what they were capable of on 27 November. Now they were ready to be used in earnest.

There were half a million men available for the assault. On 5 December the Red Army launched limited counteroffensives against German positions, and found that the Germans surprisingly gave up their positions easily. Encouraged, the Soviets decided to push harder. Rokossovsky's forces to the southwest of the city and Konev's in the north led the push. The front was almost a thousand kilometers (600 miles) wide. The Soviets were now committing massive reserves that



German intelligence had never really accounted for; Red artillery had plenty of ammunition and was close to supply bases; and the Red Air Force was out in strength.

Indeed, although the Red Air Force had lost immense numbers of planes in the early days of the war, most of the planes destroyed were obsolescent anyway, and since the aircraft had been mostly shot and bombed while sitting on an airfield, losses of trained pilots had been relatively light. The Red Air Force was now beginning to obtain quantities of modern aircraft, such as the formidable, heavily-armored Ilyushin Il-2 Shturmovik close-support aircraft, or "Flying Tank", and the fast Petlyakov Pe-2 light bomber. The Soviets were well able to operate these aircraft in otherwise intolerable winter weather. For example, ground crews would drain all the oil from an aircraft when it landed, and keep the oil heated with a field stove until it was poured back in to ready the aircraft for combat again.

The Soviet T-34 tank, better than anything the Germans had and designed with winter operations in mind, was now becoming available in quantity. The new "Katyusha (Sweet Little Katy)" barrage rocket launcher was capable of pouring a wall of explosive on German positions with munitions whose shrill screams shattered the nerve of those who survived the attacks. Well-trained Soviet ski troops moved quickly through German positions. Within 48 hours, the Soviet juggernaut was in full motion.

The Red Army drove forward from Moscow in the center and attacked to open a lifeline to Leningrad in the north, while Soviet forces pushed towards Kursk in the Ukraine. Hitler ordered Army Group Center to stand its ground, but it was impossible. On 20 December, Heinz Guderian told Hitler that his troops could no longer fight. The Soviet Union had seemed on the edge of defeat, and instead had inflicted an undeniable defeat on the Germans.

Soviet propaganda paraded pictures of German soldiers captured wearing women's winter coats or other ridiculous gear, calling them "Winter Fritzes". Films showed the numb and frightened faces of German prisoners, herded off to prison camps. Most would not return. There were not great numbers of German prisoners; although the German Army had taken a beating, there were few more professional armies in the world, and the Germans had managed to fall back in order and avoid encirclement. However, Hitler was not happy with commanders that gave ground and sacked dozens of generals. Runstedt had been one of the first to leave, with those following prominently including Guderian, who would never hold a major field command again. Von Brauchitsch suffered a heart attack and was forced to retire on 19 December, with the Fuehrer having little kindly to say about him and then assigning himself, Hitler, the role of Commander in Chief of the German Army.

Some historians claim that Hitler's insistence on standing fast kept the German Army from collapsing in the face of the Red Army's offensive, while others suggest that it only increased suffering and losses, since the Soviet drive would have run out of steam as it outstretched its supply lines anyway. Hitler might well have considered the lesson that Stalin had shown such trouble grasping -- that it was better to abandon terrain to preserve forces that could be used later to give the enemy a real blow under much more favorable conditions. Whatever the reality of the situation, it is clear that Hitler thought that his stubbornness had saved the day, and came to an unambiguous conclusion that would have major consequences later: Hold ground at all costs.

* The Germans had been forced to abandon piles of equipment. The Soviets proudly displayed these discards to British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden when he arrived on a diplomatic visit on the evening of 15 December. The British and the United States had doubted the Soviet Union would survive, and the Soviets displayed the results of their victory with great pride. Eden was properly impressed, in fact seeming to become somewhat overly taken with Stalin, though when Stalin proposed to Eden that the British recognize the Soviet seizure of the Baltics and eastern Poland -- even suggesting that after the war the British could balance these appropriations by taking over bits of France and the Low Countries with Soviet acceptance -- Koba found the British distinctly cool to the idea.

Eden wired Churchill from the British embassy to report on Stalin's proposals, with the prime minister replying that "we are bound to the United States not to enter into secret and special

pacts." Churchill saw no sense in a pointed rejection of Soviet territorial ambitions, however, telling Eden that such questions would have to wait on "the peace conference when we had won the war." Stalin did not like that answer at all and pressed Eden on the matter.

* In the newly-liberated territories, Russian soldiers were greeted ecstatically by liberated villagers, and Muscovites celebrated Christmas and New Years' with exuberance that had bubbled up through the gloom. Still, as Red troops moved into territories held by the Nazis, they were appalled by the destruction and desolation. The Germans wrecked everything with their characteristic efficiency as they withdrew, and their rule over the occupied lands had not been gentle in the first place.

The Nazis took particular pleasure in defacing the treasures of Slavic culture. In the town of Klim, they burned the house of the composer Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, and destroyed the score of his Sixth Symphony. Count Leo Tolstoy's house in Yasnaya Polyana was razed to the chimneys, and his gravesite was dug up to allow German soldiers to be buried there instead. Russian Orthodox churches were often burned and their icons destroyed.

The churches were also often sites of executions. The Germans killed Soviet civilians with little provocation or hesitation. Soviet propaganda films caught the savagery with heart-wrenching vividness, showing the corpses of the hanged swinging in rows in the falling snow; the burned bodies of victims in shattered houses; a mother weeping, arranging the hair of her dead daughter, a pretty young woman killed by the Nazis.

[5.4] AMERICA ENTERS THE WAR

* In the meantime, the United States had come into the war in full force. On 7 December, Maxim Litvinov arrived in Washington DC as the ambassador to the USA, to replace the detested Oumansky. Even as Litvinov was arriving at the airport, the news was flying around like a whirlwind that Japan had just attacked the US Navy base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, inflicting massive damage. America was now a full combatant in the conflict. There was the difficulty that the Japanese attack did not give Roosevelt an option for declaring war on Germany, but Hitler declared war on the USA on 11 December.

The full entry of the US into the war had enormous consequences, but it was not entirely good news to the Kremlin in the short term, since it meant diversion of American military aid for the USSR. On the other side of the coin, the Japanese had committed themselves to a fight with the Americans and there was no way they could present a threat to the Soviet Union in the meantime. Indeed, given the massive imbalance of power between Japan and the USA, over the long run Japan might well be eliminated as a threat, period.

On 22 December, Churchill arrived in Washington DC along with British government and military staff to discuss war planning. It seemed appropriate at the time to produce a statement of common purpose for those at war with the Axis. The statement was released on 1 January 1942, with the signatories including the USA, Britain, the USSR, and all the other co-belligerents from

China down to Albania, described simply as the "United Nations". The term was used because Roosevelt was cautious about calling it an "alliance", which had legal implications that might have caused problems with the US Congress, but the concept of the "United Nations" had been born and would take on greater importance in the future. In any case, the document stated:

BEGIN QUOTE:

Being convinced that complete victory over their enemies is essential to defend life, liberty, independence and religious freedom, and to preserve human rights and justice in their own lands as well as in other lands, and that they are now engaged in a common struggle against savage and brutal forces seeking to subjugate the world, DECLARE:

1: Each Government pledges itself to employ its full resources, military or economic, against those members of the Tripartite Pact and its adherents with which such government is at war.

2: Each Government pledges itself to cooperate with the Governments signatory hereto and not to make a separate armistice or peace with the enemies.

END QUOTE

In hindsight, though it was an obvious declaration under the circumstances, it seemed more than slightly ironic that the Soviet Union would sign a document proclaiming its commitment to "human rights and justice". Indeed, Ambassador Litvinov had balked at the reference to "religious freedom" and only caved in after Roosevelt gave him a heavy sales job -- the president knew that Soviet hostility to religion didn't go over well with American voters and wanted to reassure the electorate. It was actually no great issue to Stalin; the Soviet Union was comfortable with declarations of grand principles. Implementation, of course, was another matter.

[6.0] The German Occupation Of The USSR

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* The policies of the German occupation forces in the occupied regions of the Soviet Union were shaped by Hitler's racial bigotries and his desire for conquest. The locals were to be subjugated and reduced to an inferior status, when they were not simply exterminated. German brutalities in the occupied territories defied belief, and in response to the terror many citizens took up arms and engaged in guerrilla warfare against the invaders. Beyond the limits of the German advance, Soviet citizens mobilized to perform extraordinary efforts to drive out the enemy, while the Western Allies ramped up their efforts to provide support.

[6.1] THE NAZI TERROR

* When the Nazis seized western Poland in the fall of 1939, many of the citizens of that land who had reason to fear them, such as Jews and Communists, fled east to the strictly relative safety of the Soviet Union. After the German invasion of the USSR in the spring of 1941, many of these people found themselves trapped by the Nazi occupation. They, and many of the peoples of Eastern Europe and Russia that had fallen under Hitler's control, now felt the teeth of the Nazi terror.

For a short time the Germans wore the velvet glove, presenting themselves as liberators. The first item on their agenda was to discredit Stalin by revealing the horrors in Soviet prisons and digging up mass graves of victims killed by the NKVD. There were many such gravesites. German moviemen captured the monstrosities in detail, and the films were played in cinemas back in the Reich. Although Josef Goebbels' Nazi propaganda machine was a master of the "big lie", there was no need to lie about Stalin's cruelties. Even though they were the truth, they were still hard to believe.

The moviemen caught Ukrainians smashing statues of Stalin and tearing down Soviet propaganda posters. The German authorities also encouraged locals to settle scores with Stalin's servants. This measure served the dual purpose of throwing a bone to the population while rooting out and destroying the Reich's enemies. The Germans offered rewards for information about Communists and Jews in hiding, as well as reports about ordinary folk who lacked enthusiasm for their new masters.

The Soviets had reparcled land and other possessions in the territories they had conquered in the west before the invasion as a means of cementing Soviet authority. The Nazis did it themselves, for similar reasons. The people had marched in demonstrations the year before to praise Great Father Stalin, and now they did it again to praise Hitler, their deliverer. Few of these people had ever read Hitler's turgid MEIN KAMPF. They did not realize that in his cosmic order the inferior Slavic peoples of the East were fit only to be servants for the German master race. The Nazis were careful to keep their contempt hidden for the moment, though when Ukrainian leadership

tried to set up a new government for their region after the arrival of the Germans, they were arrested.

The velvet glove quickly disappeared to reveal the Nazi iron fist. While Jews, Gypsies, and Communists were at the top of the list of undesirable, the list didn't end there. The Reich needed living space in the East. Although subhuman Slavs had their uses, the Reich wanted their lands for German people. The Slavs had to be removed, if need be in a permanent fashion. SS chief Heinrich Himmler projected that about 30 million of the locals would die, mostly by the process of simply taking all their food and letting them starve.

The locals still had their uses. The Soviet Union was not yet beaten and the menfolk of the occupied territories would make perfectly good cannon fodder. The SS, which was responsible for most of the dirty work of Nazi policy in the occupied territories, raised units from the Ukraine, Belorussia, Latvia, Estonia. A million people in the occupied region became collaborators in the employ of the Germans, and a third of these people became soldiers. They were quickly put to use in combat, mostly in second-string duties such as cleaning up Red Army stragglers left isolated by the rapid German advance. About 70,000 of these collaborators were employed by the SS as assistants in a campaign of terror against the inhabitants. Even adolescents were recruited in the effort to cleanse the population of undesirable.

[6.2] THE GERMAN MASTERS

* The brutality of the Germans in the East was not entirely planned. In principle, the vast conquered territories were to be controlled by the "Ostministerium (East Ministry)" under Alfred Rosenberg. Rosenberg was actually in favor of keeping a fairly loose leash on the conquered territories, building them up to provide a defensive wall against whatever remained of Bolshevism to the East. Rosenberg was still a hardcore Nazi; his vision of the regime in the East was authoritarian and the ruling class would be the Germans -- but as long as the locals did what they were told, he saw no reason to be particularly harsh with them. In fact, Rosenberg believed with plenty of good reason that after Stalinism, the subject peoples would find a more or less reasonable German occupation a comparative relief.

Rosenberg, however, was not a very strong personality, and as far Hitler himself was concerned the Slavs were untermensch. Though Hitler made agreeable noises about Rosenberg's plans, the Fuehrer had no intention of treating the Slavs as anything but untermensch. Rosenberg's position in the Reich was a reward for loyal service, but that reward did not include taking him more seriously than the Fuehrer felt necessary. Furthermore, other factions in the back-stabbing Nazi hierarchy had their own ideas for the East. The biggest threats to Rosenberg's authority were from Martin Bormann, -- whose title as head of the Nazi Party office in the Reich did not exactly convey the massive authority he held from his close proximity to the Fuehrer -- as well as Heinrich Himmler and, at least in the early days of the occupation, Reichsmarshal Goering.

The end result was that the rule of the East fell under the control of a very mixed gang. Formally, the grand plan of the Nazis was to set up four regions, or "Kommissariats", in the occupied lands

for colonization by Aryans. The Baltic States were under Heinrich Lohse; Belorussia was under the control of Wilhelm Kube; and the Ukraine was to be under the control of Eric Koch. The fourth region was to stretch from Moscow, which would become an artificial lake, to the Urals. It was to be known as "Moscovia".

The authority of these German "viceroys", or "Reichskommissars" as they were known, was diluted by the SS, which operated as if it were above the law of the civil authority -- which in fact it was. The campaign of terror in the East was directed by SS special action groups, or "Einsatzgruppen", each consisting of about 3,000 men. There were four such groups, each assigned to its own region in the occupied lands, and all under the command of SS General Erich von dem Bach-Zelewsky. They would eventually kill hundreds of thousands of people. The only fortunate thing was that this was such a small fraction of what Himmler had hoped to accomplish.

The Einsatzgruppen had followed closely behind the advancing armies. One was operating in Kiev only two days after the city's fall to the Wehrmacht in September 1941. The Jews of the city were rounded up and marched to a nearby ravine known as Babi Yar. There, they were ordered to strip naked, herded into mass graves, and shot. The Red Army would retake the site in 1944 and find 125,000 corpses there.

Those Jews who could not be dealt with right away were penned up in ghettos. The largest was in Minsk. In the Minsk ghetto, the people were rounded up for work details and deprived of food. Any of them could be killed at whim by their German masters or local flunkies. When hunger drained the life out of them, the skeletal bodies were carted off and thrown indifferently into a mass grave. At the end of the war, the mass grave contained 120,000 dead.

Kube was not happy with the activities of the SS in Belorussia, and complained up the chain of command. Kube had no great problems with brutality, but the SS raised the brutality to a level of whimsical mindlessness. 23 skilled Polish workers had been sent East since their services were needed; they were billeted in a jail for a lack of any other place to put them. The SS simply grabbed them and shot the lot of them, and ignored protests over the matter. Eric Koch was much more enthusiastic about the heavy-handed approach, carrying around a whip and suggesting that the best thing to do in the Ukraine was to kill all the adult males and then use the women as Aryan breeding stock. Koch shut down the schools in the Ukraine -- what conceivable reason was there to give slaves an education? He would eventually acquire the nickname of the "Second Stalin", and seem to like it.

Rosenberg and Koch were bitter enemies. Koch had been forced on Rosenberg. Koch was an old-time hard-core Nazi, though ironically he had started out as a Communist. Koch had long and close ties with Hitler, as well as direct access to the Fuehrer through Koch's "other hat" as Gauleiter of East Prussia, and Koch had no reason to care in the least about Rosenberg's technical authority over him. Koch would even be rude to Rosenberg's face in public. This insubordination went beyond a mere personal issue: the broken lines of authority in the Ostministerium, undermined by Hitler at any whim, reduced the organization to bureaucratic chaos. In vain, Rosenberg reprimanded Koch for his harsh approach, suggesting that all it was

going to accomplish was to convince the locals that the Nazis were worse than the Bolsheviks and lead to massive resistance against the German occupation.

Rosenberg, for all his limitations, was far-sighted in this. Lohse, in charge of the Baltic States, ran them under the principle that there was no sense in mistreating people who obeyed the orders of the masters. This was much better than the deal the Baltics had got from Stalin, and the Baltics would never develop strong resistance movements against the Germans -- in fact, they provided much more of an economic benefit to the Reich than all the other conquests in the East. Certainly, had the Germans enlisted the Ukrainians as brothers in the fight against Bolshevism, they would have obtained many enthusiastic Ukrainian recruits. When German troops first arrived in the region, many of them automatically assumed that was how things were going to work.

* They were mistaken. Hitler made his contempt for Rosenberg's ideas plain, and whatever pretense remained of treating Belorussians and Ukrainians as anything less than beasts of burden vanished completely. The German Foreign Ministry had been talking with various emigres who were seen as potentially useful surrogate leaders in the East. The Foreign Ministry was forced to give up on the exercise; files on the emigres were passed on to the SS, who threw the lot of them into concentration camps.

The German brutality in the East was far-reaching. Thousands of children who were regarded as of promising stock were rounded up and sent west for reeducation, to become breeders for the Reich, as if they were so many cattle. Many children were sent to special education camps, where they were used in medical experiments or forced labor. If they outlived their usefulness, they were often murdered. Many adults were taken west as well, to be used as slave labor under a program begun in 1942.

As the SS rounded up food and livestock and sent it West, the Soviet people under their control were given a simple choice: either they worked for the Germans, or such "useless eaters" starved. Nazi propaganda films praised the "Friendship Movement" by which the locals and the Germans worked hand in hand, with smiling German soldiers frolicking with dancing peasant girls. After the war, survivors of the occupation saw the films and responded incredulously. Friendship Movement? The girls tried to make themselves look ugly and hid when German soldiers came to their villages.

Although German Army troops later blamed all the horrors of the occupation in the East on the SS, in fact regions closer to the front lines were often under direct military control, and the locals were treated about the same -- left to starve and subject to brutal reprisals for any activities against the conquerers. German Army troops engaged in the same sort of pacification operations as the SS Einsatzgruppen -- raping women and girls, burning down villages, and slaughtering civilians; they were simply not as focused on the task as the SS. In addition, although German Army commanders issued orders that regular troops were not to participate in the mass executions performed by the SS Einsatzgruppen, either as voluntary active participants or as spectators, standing by and taking pictures -- German Army soldiers had actually done such things! -- these officers were aware of what was going on, and in fact provided logistical support to SS operations.

The mindset of the Germans would prove self-defeating, creating an attitude of hatred and stubborn resistance among the conquered peoples, many of whom would have otherwise have thanked the invaders for deliverance. One girl trapped behind German lines wrote a letter that was smuggled out to her father in the Red Army, with the girl saying: "Many people have been killed in the villages around here. And all they think about is the bloodthirsty monsters, you can't even call them human, they're just robbers and drinkers of blood. Papa, kill the enemy!"

* The extent and level of the brutality in the East remains appalling, but there were exceptions to the callousness. Only a handful of the Jews held in Belorussia were saved, and as one of those survivors said later, they always had an angel who saved them.

A 48-year-old SS Oberleutnant named Schultz, who worked at the Minsk ghetto, fell in love with a 23-year-old Jewish girl named Elsa. He bought a truck and smuggled 25 women out of the ghetto, where they were picked up by the Belorussian resistance. For his reward, Schultz was sent by Soviet authorities to a prison camp, where he died within weeks. Else was sent into exile to the Jewish autonomous region in the Far East, though she would survive the war. The couple had simply escaped one monster to fall into the hands of another.

[6.3] THE WAR IN THE REAR

* Many of the peasants ran off to the deep forest, where they built camps out of sight of the Germans. They were joined in some cases by Soviet soldiers who had escaped German mopping-up operations after the great encirclements early in the invasion. They made knives and other simple weapons in hopes of using them to get better weapons from careless German soldiers, but at first the resistance groups, the "partisans", were weak and uncoordinated.

These people fought for their homes and their Motherland and prayed to God for strength. They did not fight for Stalin and did not worship him. Stalin knew this and for the moment he would not support them. He ordered Beria to send NKVD people behind German lines to perform sabotage, as well as to remind Soviet citizens under German control that they were not beyond the reach of the Soviet state. The NKVD agents performed executions when deemed necessary to punish the disloyal. Some of the executions were filmed, apparently for propaganda films designed to suggest to those inclined to independent thinking that such things might not be wise.

And yet the NKVD fighters were still often heroic. One of them, a pretty young woman named Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya and a member of the "Komsomol (Young Communist League)", was assigned to stampede horses and burn stables. She was caught by the Germans; tortured; mutilated with one breast cut off; and hanged from a gibbet. The Soviet propaganda machine played up pictures of her battered body lying frozen in the snow, with the noose still tight around her neck, and they still remain some of the most vivid and heartbreaking images of the war in the East.

* Stalin thought he could ignore the partisan movements at first, since he believed that his winter offensives would crush the German invader. This would prove untrue, forcing him to reconsider

his attitude. He had to admit that he needed help, and if the help was not exactly to his liking, he could deal with that problem when the time came.

Stalin called for the formation of official resistance units in occupied territory. These units were called "otryadi". Supplies and Red Army personnel were dropped behind the lines to help organize the otryadi. The peasant fighters were given Red Army ranks and appropriate political discipline. Soviet newsreels began to praise partisan fighters. The resistance bands were given radio receivers so they could listen to Stalin's speeches. NKVD officers established propaganda mills behind enemy lines. Belorussian partisan Ponomarenko became the leader of the great movement, while other resistance fighters became field marshals: Kovpak, Fyodorov, Rudnyev.

By the summer of 1942, there were about 150,000 partisan fighters making war against the Germans. They operated in bands ranging in size from ten to a thousand. They opposed nine second-string German security divisions. The Germans could not hope to deal with the partisans in the huge forests, where intruders would be led on merry chases if they were not simply surrounded and wiped out, so they attempted to isolate the islands of resistance with barbed wire and minefields.

Some German officers believed that brute force was counterproductive in dealing with the partisans. In the fall of 1942, Colonel Reinhard Gehlen of German military intelligence more or less resurrected Rosenberg's ideas about enlisting the locals as allies instead of brutalizing them. The notion got no further than before, with Hitler characteristically responding that the answer was more brutality, not less.

The result was an escalation of violence on both sides. The Germans began to lose the battle of the rear. Meticulous SS figures for the last six months of 1942 boast of killing 363,000 Jews and executing 19,000 suspected partisan sympathizers. As far as killing people who were actively fighting back, the SS didn't do so well, with their records indicating a mere 1,300 kills inflicted on the enemy in combat, with a little over 8,500 executed after capture.

The activities of such virulent gangs of "bandits" made exploitation of the captured territories extremely difficult. They had a psychological effect on the Germans out of proportion to the damage they actually caused, since the partisans made even driving from town to town very risky. The best any German soldier could hope for if captured by partisans was to be simply shot, instead of being killed in slower and more imaginative ways.

The partisans didn't have it all their own way, however. The first winter was in particular one of starvation and deprivation, and there were only a few primitive and necessarily isolated field hospitals to deal with the wounded who managed to live long enough to be carried to one. Although German propaganda films proclaimed that partisans who gave themselves up voluntarily and could prove they were coerced would be allowed to go free, it is unlikely that many believed such a foolish lie. Captured partisans would be shot, or preferably hanged from a gibbet to strangle. They would remain dangling there as a advertisement to the subject peoples of what would happen to those who opposed the conquerers.

The Germans enthusiastically engaged in reprisals against Russian civilians. Soviet authorities later estimated that 600 villages were razed in Belorussia alone. If the Germans were feeling kindly, they drove the villagers out to survive as best they could. If they weren't feeling kindly, they shot them or locked them in barns and set the structures on fire. Sometimes the Germans forced the peasants to walk through minefields as a means of clearing them. The women were often raped and then killed. Hitler commented: "This partisan war has its advantages. It gives us an excuse to exterminate whoever opposes us." The statement seems odd in hindsight, since the Germans never seemed to need much excuse to kill whoever they pleased.

* The partisans had their revenge when they could. Wilhelm Kube was a prominent target of Belorussian partisans. In the summer of 1942, a 22-year-old partisan named Yelena Mazanik managed to get a job in Kube's household as a maid; apparently Kube recruited a fair number of pretty young local girls into his household as a harem of sorts. Mazanik put a bomb under Kube's mattress that blew him to bits in his sleep.

Retaliation was swift and brutal. The enraged Germans hanged a thousand citizens of Minsk. Lena Mazanik escaped and became a Soviet propaganda hero. Despite that, when she was sent to Moscow she was terrorized by Beria's NKVD thugs, who were suspicious of anyone who operated at all independently and were in particular suspicious of anyone who had demonstrable skills as an assassin.

By the end of 1942, the partisans had carved out their own domains behind enemy lines. The Germans had to be ready for stand-up battles if they went into these areas. The resistance fighters raised crops and tended to livestock, building up small societies in primitive conditions. They enforced security on villages in their domain, shooting villagers who rightly or wrongly seemed insufficiently cooperative or too friendly to the enemy. Some villagers found the partisans to be as bad or worse than the Germans -- often drunk, generally thievish, and inclined to brutality with little or no provocation. Some ex-partisans later admitted to their sins: having few supplies, the only way to get fed was to take food from the peasants, who were rarely overfed themselves.

However, as the Soviet Union recovered from the terrible blows of 1941, supplies to the partisans increased to a flood. By the summer of 1943, the Germans had 300,000 troops in the rear trying to deal with the guerrillas. As the Red Army advanced, partisan fighters in the rear taking their orders from Moscow blew up trains, cut rail lines, tore town telephone lines, and burned supply depots. Eventually, a total of 1.2 million partisans fought against the Germans, demonstrating the Nazi foolishness of brutalizing people who would have otherwise regarded the Germans as liberators from Stalin.

The Germans controlled cities and strongpoints within a hostile wilderness, unable to venture out except in force. Given the devastation in the lands conquered by the Wehrmacht and the swarms of partisans infesting the countryside, Hitler's belief that his war in the East would win resources to help Germany carry on the war turned out to be a miscalculation. There was some loot to be had, of course, but under the circumstances it couldn't match what the Reich would have obtained from the Soviets through normal trade. Effective economic exploitation of the East was a task that might well take decades to achieve; Germany needed the resources in the here and now.

* Not all the partisans were controlled by Stalin. Some resistance bands fought both the Nazis and the Reds. Soviet propaganda referred to these groups as "bandits", just as the Germans called pro-Soviet partisans "bandits". Nationalist guerrilla bands sprang up in the Baltics and the Ukraine. The Ukrainian nationalist leader Stepan Bandera raised a partisan army, the "Ukrainska Povstanska Armii (UPA)", with 100,000 fighters to fight for their national independence. The result was a hidden civil war as brutal as any that took place in the open, with murders and atrocities committed by one partisan faction against the other.

As the Red Army advanced, Soviet security followed and took revenge on those who had failed to be obedient servants of Stalin. Sham courts were convened, the accused were swiftly condemned and then shot or hanged. Those who had collaborated with the Nazis or joined the ranks of the regional SS didn't even get a sham trial, usually being shot on the spot.

[6.4] THE PEOPLE'S WAR

* In the vast regions of the USSR that remained free of Nazi occupation, all the citizens threw their hearts into resisting further encroachments by Hitler's armies.

The relocation of Soviet industry to the east of the Urals that took place in front of the German advance had been a modern marvel, Stalin's machine at its most effective, with more than 1,500 factories picked up and moved wholesale in less than three months. One American reporter described it vividly: "It is as if the principal factories of New England were suddenly picked up lock, stock, and barrel and shifted bodily to the slopes of the Rocky Mountains." The enormous operation had also, and to no surprise, been accompanied by extreme hardships to the literally millions of workers involved. They had been shipped east in unheated cattle cars, with few provisions and poor sanitation. When they reached their final destinations, there was little food or shelter available in the grimy, unfinished industrial boomtowns. Workers began production in factories that didn't have roofs.

The shortage of food was greatly aggravated by the fact that vast regions of productive agricultural land and livestock had been lost to the Germans, and the loss of almost all able-bodied men from the ages of 16 to 40 into the ranks of the Soviet war machine. Women, old men, and young boys kept the factories and farms working. With production and supply all going to the front, such necessary equipment as farm tractors was hard to come by, and even when old tractors were available, there was little fuel available to run them. Plows were pulled by milk cows and farm workers, often women.

The winter of 1941:1942 was the worst, with substantial civilian losses from starvation and deprivation. By the spring of 1942, some order was beginning to return to the Soviet Union, though the USSR was still strained to the limit. Everything was rationed and hard to come by, and citizens had to scrounge, mend, and improvise to get by. Matches were scarce, so the people scrounged up flints or spyglasses to light fires. Newspapers were valued for everything from use as cigarette rolling papers, wrapping paper, toilet paper, and an extra layer between the blankets.

The citizens endured the hardships, having little choice, but they also gave up their savings to support the war effort, donating roubles to build tanks and planes, which were delivered to the front painted with text to announce that the machine was a gift from a particular collective farm or other civic organization. Stalin's propaganda apparatus helped encourage the citizens through appeals to their patriotism. The newspapers played up Soviet successes and played down Soviet defeats, though citizens quickly learned to read between the lines and figure out some approximation of the truth anyway. The propaganda mill encouraged hatred of Germans -- all of them, not just Hitler and his Nazi stooges. Ilya Ehrenburg, the Soviet Union's answer to Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, glorified the killing of Germans, encouraging the people to kill as many as they could.

The earnestness of the Soviet people in support of the war would, with help from state propaganda, become exaggerated in memory later. There had always been petty corruption, pilferage, and black marketeering in the USSR, and the war didn't put a stop to these practices by any means. Still, the patriotic fervor behind the support for the war was widespread and deep.

Although the USSR remained a police state, the hand of the NKVD had relaxed somewhat. It was still not safe to speak one's mind, but most Soviet citizens had less fear of being arrested on lunatic whims. Even Stalin had become tired of some of the ridiculous accusations in NKVD briefs, scribbling on them that the claims were "nonsense" while still often confirming the sentences.

The pointedly godless Communist regime abandoned its harassment of the Russian Orthodox Church. Communist atheism was had always been somewhat superficial in the first place. Many soldiers, particularly peasant boys, wore crucifixes around their necks -- keeping them buttoned up usually and saying it was a gift from grandmother if challenged -- and crossed themselves as they moved out into battle. The authorities called on the clergy to support the war, which they did enthusiastically, even to the extent of funding the purchase of weapons for the troops at the front. However, as will be discussed later, Soviet regional ethnic groups of doubtful loyalty to the Red cause would find that they still had plenty of good reasons to fear Koba.

The Gulag was far from disbanded, and prisoners were pushed to build new production sites. They also performed more sophisticated work than simply digging ditches and cutting down trees. Lavrenti Beria had recognized that there was no reason to waste the technical skills of Soviet engineers and scientists simply because they were officially traitors to the state, and organized "technical prisons" where those skills could be put to use.

The technical prisons were called "sharashkas", a Russian word roughly meaning "gang", and they were by the standards of the Gulag relatively comfortable and survivable. The great Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn spent time in a sharashka during the war and described it in his novel *THE FIRST CIRCLE*, a reference to the first, mild circle of Dante's Hell. The master airplane designer Andrei Tupolev, a grand older statesman of the Soviet aviation industry, ran one of the more notable sharashkas, where the excellent Tu-2 medium bomber was designed. It was later said to be one of the few production aircraft ever designed by an engineering team whose members were all in prison at the time. Tupolev would be given his freedom for his

efforts in 1943, and as the story goes Stalin even personally apologized to Tupolev and shook his hand.

Artists also supported the war effort, producing propaganda posters, many of which still remain vivid decades later; writing patriotic plays and music, which were performed to the citizens and the troops on the front lines; and creating documentaries and movies, with the work of combat reporters and photographers filtered through the Sovinformburo propaganda organization and widely distributed to the public.

One documentary, ONE DAY OF THE WAR, featured the work of 160 cameramen, 30 of whom were killed in action. The great film director Sergei Eisenstein produced IVAN THE TERRIBLE PART I, with the tyrant Ivan now played up as a Russian patriot. After the war, Eisenstein would produce IVAN THE TERRIBLE PART II, but then Stalin would find the implied comparison between himself and the mad and brutal Ivan less flattering. Eisenstein escaped the security apparatus by the effective if drastic measure of dying of a heart attack.

In any case, the wartime propaganda played up Stalin above all, raising him to the status of a demigod: omniscient, all-wise, all-powerful. Despite the propaganda, many Soviet citizens understood that Stalin was a tyrant who ruled by fear. Still, he was their leader in a bitter war with a far more hated enemy. No matter how vicious he was, there would be a streak of admiration and fondness for the Great Leader. He might have been a brutal father, but he was father nonetheless. This was not just his war, it was the people's war, the "Great Patriotic War".

[6.5] ALLIED ASSISTANCE

* Allied assistance slowly ramped up through 1942. Weapons and supplies were brought up through Iran, Siberia, and Murmansk. The Siberian route was a particularly important pipeline for delivery of American aircraft, though cargo vessels also bought in materiel through Vladivostok, with the materiel then brought west by rail. The vessels were either Soviet or had been flagged by convenience as Soviet, allowing them to steam with impunity in Japanese-controlled waters. The Germans leaned on the Japanese to take action against the shipment of weapons to the Soviets for use against the Reich, but the Japanese did nothing serious to interfere: they had no more wish to start a fight with the Soviets than, for the time being, the Soviets had to start a fight with them.

However, the most prominent port of entry was Murmansk, in the Soviet Arctic near the Finnish border. Oddly, ocean currents in the area meant that Murmansk was ice-free even when ports well to the south, like Archangel, were frozen over. There were some problems with getting processes in place at first, with British Royal Navy personnel stationed at Murmansk to support the convoys harassed by Soviet bureaucracy. Churchill complained to Stalin, who blandly replied that the British had to obey Soviet laws. Churchill shot back, not at all blandly, that he would halt the convoys if the games didn't stop. Stop they did.

The Allied Murmansk convoys were a major effort and were conducted under great hazards. They had to skirt around German-occupied Norway to reach Murmansk, and often suffered badly from Luftwaffe bombers, as well as German Navy U-boats and surface warships. Sailors falling into the frigid waters froze to death in minutes. The convoys were protected by the Royal Navy and, as the freighters neared Murmansk, the Red Navy, which was a "shallow water" force mostly oriented towards coastal defense.

The Germans of course recognized the importance of Murmansk, and launched an attack from Finland in the spring of 1942 to capture the city. After three days of tough fighting the German attack was blunted, with Soviet Marines in berets and red-striped tee shirts proving particularly effective fighters. The Germans learned respect for the "sea devils". It was the last time the Germans tried the direct approach against Murmansk. They refocused their efforts on using bombers and U-boats to shut down the lifeline. In response, Soviet long-range coastal guns targeted the harbor of Petsamo in northern Finland, which was used to supply nickel ore to the Reich, and did much to squeeze off traffic from the port. Red Navy submarines also torpedoed German vessels operating off of northern Finland and Norway.

By the end of 1942, Allied assistance to the USSR had become a flood, though it would never be more than a minority of the vast quantities of material needed to support the Soviet war machine. Still, despite the fact that the Soviets downplayed the assistance, then and later, as inconsequential, the aid was far from trivial.

The Soviet Union was supplied with tens of thousands of aircraft, in particular the Bell P-39 Airacobra; hundreds of thousands of sturdy 6x6 trucks and little four-wheel-drive jeeps, the jeep proving so handy that the Germans considered capturing one from the Soviets a real prize; and raw materials, such as aviation aluminum alloys, as well as food and clothing. The Red Army would receive tins of Spam to keep them fed and large quantities of felt-lined boots that would be deeply appreciated by the infantry in winter combat. There was even space for some niceties, such as American chocolate.

Some tanks were sent as well, though the Soviets had better armor and were rightfully unimpressed by Western tanks. Ironically, their superb T-34 had its roots in a tank designed by an American, Walter Christie, which the US Army had not seen fit to adopt. On the other hand, Western electronics systems, such as radar sets, were highly appreciated, and the Soviets worked hard to reverse-engineer them and build them on their own.

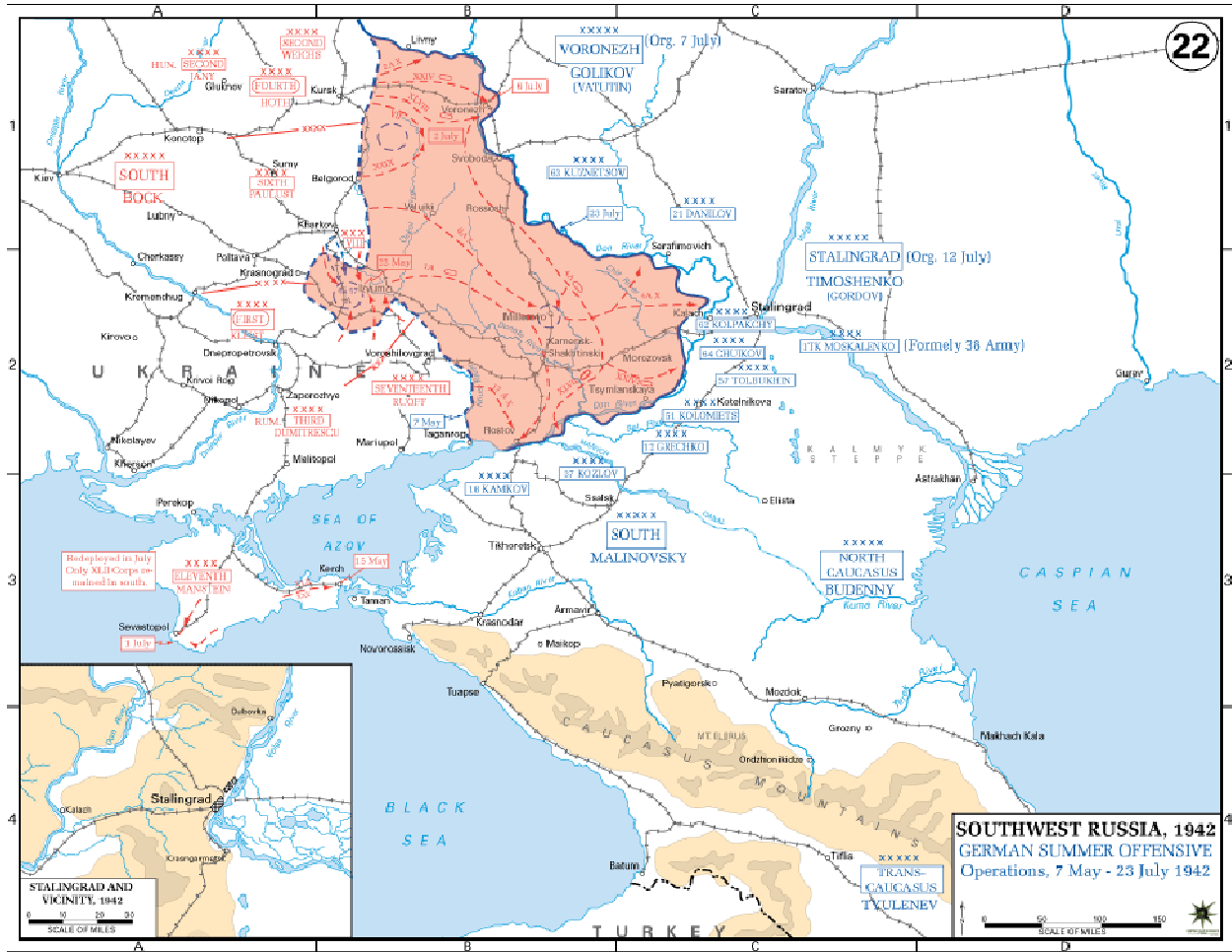
Stalin's appreciation was always limited. He always wanted more, and in particular he demanded a second front. In a sense he had got a second front almost at the outset, when the Japanese attacked the Americans, ensuring that Japan could not seriously threaten Siberia for the time being. It did not escape the notice of his allies that while Stalin was demanding a second front he was very strictly doing nothing to help them in their war against the Japanese. Hints by the Americans to allow them to set up air bases in the Soviet Far East to bomb the Japanese home islands were unambiguously rejected. The Americans were not inclined to press the matter: for the time being, the Soviets obviously had their hands full.

The British, partly for a lack of anything better to do to support the USSR by offensive action, were conducting a bomber war against the Reich, to which the Americans would soon begin to add their weight. The bombing was inaccurate and no more than a serious inconvenience to German war production at the time, but it did help relieve the pressure on the USSR by forcing the Reich to dedicate fighter aircraft and other resources to home defense. The British lost many bombers and aircrew, but Stalin had little gratitude. Bombing the Fascists was all well and good, but it wasn't a second front, and Stalin wanted a second front *now*.

[7.0] Germans Resurgent

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* With the return of good weather in the spring of 1942, the Germans were ready to retake the offensive in the East. Hitler's priority was the seizure of the oil fields of the Caucasus, and after a crisp mopping-up operation to capture Sevastopol in the Crimea, the Germans punched through the southern regions of the Soviet line and drove East rapidly.



[7.1] SOVIET FUMBLINGS / OPERATION FREDERICUS

* The Red Army's attacks of December 1941 had been performed for limited objectives, and in early January Stalin decided to follow up with a general counteroffensive, consisting of five coordinated thrusts up and down the line that would throw the Germans out of the USSR. The plan had been created at Stalin's order by Marshal Boris Shaposhnikov, the chief of the Red Army's general staff. Shaposhnikov, incidentally, was something of an anomaly in Stalin's military family, an ex-Tsarist officer who had survived the purges. Furthermore, for whatever mysterious reasons Stalin treated him with a level of respect he rarely granted other generals, calling him familiarly "Boris Mikhailovich" and not raising his voice even when he and Shaposhnikov disagreed on some matter.

Shaposhnikov presented the plan to senior Red Army generals in Stalin's office at the Kremlin on the evening of 5 January. Stalin asked Zhukov for comments, and Zhukov replied that the plan was unrealistic: the Red Army lacked the resources to sustain such a broad offensive and would suffer excessive casualties for little gain. That was a particularly strong statement coming from Zhukov, who had little squeamishness over losses. Zhukov instead advocated limited and focused actions as resources allowed.

Stalin ignored the advice and said the offensive would go ahead anyway. Zhukov was annoyed at the whole farce and complained to Shaposhnikov after the meeting. Shaposhnikov, who had constructed the plan against his own better judgement, replied: "It was foolish to argue. Koba had already decided. The directives have gone out to almost all the fronts, and they will launch the offensive very soon."

"Well then, why did Stalin ask me to give my opinion?!"

"I just don't know, old man, I just don't know." They both really knew it was just Stalin toying with his underlings again.

The offensives went forward as Stalin ordered on 10 January 1942, and they came to ruin just as Zhukov had predicted. As the Red Army advanced, casualties and material losses sapped the momentum of the offensive, and Soviet supply lines through rough territory grew longer while German supply lines grew shorter. The Germans had built defenses anchored around key cities that could be kept supplied, and these "hedgehogs" withstood Red Army attacks. Almost 100,000 Germans had been encircled at Demyansk, but for ten weeks they were resupplied by air until a German relief column punched through in April. The success of the Demyansk air resupply operation would have unfortunate consequences for the Wehrmacht later.

The Soviet offensive faded in February and died out in March. Overextended Red Army forces were surrounded and wiped out. The Soviet Union had wasted great numbers of men and piles of equipment that would be desperately needed in the spring. The only compensation was that the Red Army had pushed the Germans hard and made them suffer as well.

* Despite the bloody failure of the grand offensive, Stalin wanted to try again immediately, convening a meeting in late March where Shaposhnikov outlined a scheme involving no less than seven coordinated attacks all up and down the line. Zhukov and others protested that resources were lacking, and that it would be wiser to focus on one or a few fronts and perform "active defense" in the others, simply probing the Germans with limited attacks to keep them off-balance and to prevent them from shifting forces to other parts of the line.

Stalin mocked Zhukov's proposals as half-measures, and then relented much more than anyone expected. He decided that there would be three offensive thrusts: one in the north to relieve Leningrad, one in the south to relieve Sevastopol, and one in the center to retake Kharkov. In the other four sectors, the Red Army would perform "partial offensives", which amounted to active defense operations.

The Leningrad offensive hardly got off the ground. The Second Shock Army, which had attempted to block the German drive on Leningrad, had been isolated by the Wehrmacht during the winter fighting, and the Red Army ended up being diverted by attempts to relieve the trapped men. On 21 March, Stalin had sent Lieutenant General Andrei Vlasov to take command of the Second Shock Army and lead them to safety. Vlasov had distinguished himself during the fighting in the fall and winter, but he was unable to perform a breakout; the Germans would finally mop up the remnants of the Second Shock Army in late June, inflicting a loss of almost 100,000 men on the Red Army, the majority of them killed in action. Vlasov was captured by German troops in a farmhouse. Embittered, he actually signed up with the Germans to lead a force of equally disaffected ex-Soviet troops, the "Russkaya Osvoboditelnaya Armiya (ROA / Russian Liberation Army)", against the USSR.

The attack to relieve Sevastopol failed as well. The Red Army jumped off in April from their lines in the Kerch peninsula, on the eastern shore of the Crimea, only to find that the Germans in front of them had been reinforced. The offensive, which was poorly led and organized in the first place, was halted in its tracks within days.

The drive on Kharkov seemed to go well at first. Marshal Timoshenko was in command and was enthusiastic about the operation. The winter fighting had produced a salient into German lines around the town of Izyum, on the west bank of the Donetz to the southeast of Kharkov, and Timoshenko used the salient as springboard to attack on 12 May with 640,000 men and 1,200 tanks. The troops went forward, feeling confident, as massed Soviet artillery hammered the German defenses. When the soldiers advanced through the lines, they found no German corpses, but many were still naive enough at the time to interpret this as evidence that the enemy was on the run. The Germans had in fact been caught off-balance -- but they rarely stayed off-balance for very long.

The Red Army reached the outskirts of Kharkov on 17 May. However, Timoshenko had to call a halt, since he was outrunning his supply lines and was also beginning to suspect he was walking into a trap. German resistance was uncharacteristically and suspiciously light, and prisoners had been captured who were from units not known by Soviet intelligence to be in the area; it seemed wisest to dig in and consolidate the gains. The next day Stalin ordered that the offensive drive

continue. Timoshenko's political commissar, Nikita Krushev, called the Kremlin to protest, but it did no good.

It was too late anyway. The German Army Group South was now under Field Marshal Fedor von Bock. Reichenau had suffered a heart attack after going for a run in bitterly cold weather in mid-January; he might have survived, except that the aircraft being used to cart him off to a hospital crashed. Even before the beginning of Timoshenko's offensive, Bock had been massing forces to pinch off the Izyum salient, and though the Germans had been originally surprised and thrown back by the attack, they were ready and more than willing to respond. The 6th Army under Friedrich Paulus was to drive into the salient from the north while the 1st Panzer Army under General Ewald von Kleist struck from the south. The offensive, codenamed Operation FREDERICUS, was to jump off on 18 May.

Although the 6th Army had been forced to yield ground to the Soviets and was fighting a difficult defensive battle, FREDERICUS went forward on schedule on 18 May, with the First Panzer Army driving into the flank of Timoshenko's force after a heavy artillery barrage. Paulus managed to shuttle 6th Army tanks northeast behind his line of defense and begin the other half of the pincer movement on 19 May. Soviet troops fought desperately to keep the trap from closing shut, but elements of the German First Panzer Army and the 6th Army linked up at the on the Donets on 22 May, closing what was later called the "Barvenkovo Mousetrap", after a town in the area. By the end of the month, it was all over. 70,000 Red Army soldiers had been killed, 200,000 taken prisoner, and only 22,000 escaped. The entire Soviet defense of the south was correspondingly weakened.

One Red Army soldier who could speak German and was captured recalled later that he overheard two SS officers chatting, one saying: "It's a shame Marshal Timoshenko is not present to see all of this. The Fuehrer has reserved a medal for him, the iron cross with oak leaves, to thank him for making such a big contribution to German victory."

[7.2] MOLOTOV IN THE WEST

* The failure of Soviet counteroffensives in early 1942 did not go unnoticed in the West. With the spring promising to be difficult for the USSR, Stalin sent Molotov to London and Washington DC in mid-May to see what help could be obtained. The foreign minister traveled in a Pe-8 four-engine bomber, flying over occupied Denmark at altitudes too high for German fighters, to arrive in Scotland on 20 May.

Molotov took a train to London, where he signed a treaty with Britain that essentially reaffirmed agreements made the previous July, and carefully evaded saying too much about the arrangement of the postwar world. Molotov's major purpose was to push for a second front against the Nazis, however. The British were not enthusiastic about the idea, seeing no way to take any such action in a serious way over the short term, pushing Molotov to talk the matter over with President Roosevelt.

Molotov flew on to Washington DC, where he spoke with Roosevelt and senior US officials. The president did try to discuss postwar arrangements but made little progress on that matter; Molotov was much more concerned about a second front, a landing on the European continent in the near future that would "draw off 40 German divisions." American military chiefs were thinking about a major landing in Europe in the spring of 1943, an operation that would be codenamed ROUNDUP, but given lack of resources, particularly shipping and landing craft, there was no way to do much but perform a diversionary attack in 1942, and likely a suicidal one at that.

There was planning for such a sacrificial operation, codenamed SLEDGEHAMMER, and the president promised Molotov that "we expect the formation of a second front this year." US Army chief of staff General George C. Marshall was not happy about this promise and hedged on it to Molotov. In addition, although the president insisted that America would indeed open up a second front in 1942, Roosevelt also told Molotov that building up for such an operation would mean reduction in Lend-Lease aid to the USSR. The foreign minister was not happy about that at all, though clearly the Soviets couldn't have it both ways.

Molotov went back to Moscow in early June. The discussions were seen as constructive, with many details hammered out on Lend-Lease -- though the British and Americans had been careful to avoid any commitments on postwar boundaries in the East, while Molotov had been careful not to press them very hard on such matters. However, Molotov realized the chances of a second front in France in 1942 were not very good.

In hindsight, SLEDGEHAMMER was a fantasy. The shipping and landing craft needed to pull it off were simply not available. Such forces as could be committed to SLEDGEHAMMER at the time would have been completely outnumbered and easily crushed by the 25 second-string German divisions already occupying France, without any real inconvenience to Nazi operations in the East. For the moment, the British were pushing for an Anglo-American invasion of French North Africa, the operation being codenamed GYMNAST at the time, to later be renamed TORCH. It was what could be done and it would have definite benefits. However, it was clear that British and Americans could do little to draw off Nazi pressure on the USSR in the coming months of war in the East.

[7.3] PLAN BLUE

* Hitler had been worried by the failure of his Wehrmacht to knock out the Red Army in 1941 and the reverses of December 1941. Now that America was in the war, Germany faced combinations of enemies on two fronts. Hitler knew that he had to achieve final victory in the Soviet Union in 1942, or he was likely to lose the war. The success of FREDERICUS greatly encouraged the Fuehrer, with Hitler proclaiming: "The Russian is dead!"

Stalin's fumbled offensives of winter and spring of 1942 suggested that the Soviets only had the advantage when the weather was in their favor. The Red Army had demonstrated that its leadership still left much to be desired and that its troops, though tough, were raw and lacked

fighting skills. On the other hand, the German Army had consolidated their positions and supply lines during the winter. New equipment -- such as Panzer IV tanks with long-barreled guns that could deal more effectively with Soviet armor, and the formidable Focke-Wulf 190 fighter -- was being delivered in numbers. With the weather warming and the roads drying out, both Hitler and his soldiers had good reason to believe they could turn the tables back on the Soviets, even give them a final knockout.

The operation was already in advanced stages of preparation when the Germans cleaned out the Izyum salient. The main objectives of the new offensive, codenamed Plan BLUE (BLAU), were to extend German control over the Ukraine beyond the Volga, seize the mineral resources of the Don Basin, and particularly grab the oil wealth of the Caucasus in the form of the oil production centers at Grozny and Baku. Hitler saw BLUE as part of a grand campaign, in which Army Group South under Bock would drive through the southern USSR into the Middle East, while Rommel's Afrika Corps would crush the British in Egypt and then sweep north to meet the other prong of the huge pincer moving down through the Caucasus. The Third Reich would obtain all the oil it needed to stay in business indefinitely, while the Soviet Union would be rendered helpless.

Some of Hitler's generals warned him that the German Army was weaker now than it had been a year before. There had been substantial losses of men and equipment during the winter fighting, and there had been particular losses of horses, which the infantry divisions relied upon for supply. The German Army's transport capability had been inadequate a year earlier, at the beginning of BARBAROSSA, and it was in worse shape now. German industry had been unable to make good losses in equipment.

Hitler acknowledged these criticisms to an extent, weakening other sectors to build up his forces in the south and squeezing his allies for all the troops he could get. By June, dozens of divisions from Hungary, Rumania, and Italy were flowing into the region. Even volunteers from Spain joined up, to form what became known as the "Blue Division", fighting in the siege of Leningrad. The Spaniards were notoriously fearless, though they had little concept of formal military discipline and never saw eye to eye with the Germans on such matters. However, most of the rest of the foreign units were not useful for offensive operations, and were simply assigned to hold the line in quiet sectors while German troops moved forward.

Having looted other fronts to obtain offensive forces, Hitler was making a big gamble on a throw of the dice. If BLUE failed, the Reich would have depleted its best reserves. Equipping the offensive was troublesome, thanks to Germany's lack of manufacturing capacity. In the summer of 1941, Hitler had been so confident of beating the USSR that he had emphasized construction of U-boats and planes to defeat Britain. Shifting production back to building tanks and other weapons for the army took time, all the more so because of the inefficiency of the clumsy, backbiting Nazi bureaucracy.

[7.4] THE FALL OF SEVASTOPOL

* While the German Army was preparing to begin BLUE, it was winding up of the most brutal sieges of the war. Since the fall of 1941, the German 11th Army and the Rumanian Third Army had been hammering at the Soviets surrounded in Sevastopol. The terrain was rocky and rugged, favoring the defense, the Soviets had set up three lines of fortifications, and they had also heavily reinforced the garrison. The Axis forces had performed their initial attack on the Sevastopol lines on 30 October 1941, capturing the Balaklava Hills in the southeast against fierce Soviet resistance. A second push began in mid-December and made progress, but had to be called off because of the pressure of Soviet counteroffensive efforts elsewhere.

The Germans wanted to finish off Sevastopol before putting BLUE into motion. The task was assigned to General Erich von Manstein and his 11th Army. The first thing he had to do was clean out the Red Army presence on the Kerch Peninsula, which would then allow him to deal with Sevastopol without interference.

Manstein called the first phase Operation BUSTARD HUNT, a "bustard" being a well-known European game bird. The peninsula was linked to the rest of the Crimea by a isthmus 18 kilometers (11 miles) wide, and the Red Army had heavily fortified the line, with a wide water-filled antitank ditch backed up by minefields, barbed wire, and pillboxes. BUSTARD HUNT went forward on the morning of 8 May 1942, with German artillery and Luftwaffe Stuka dive-bombers trying to soften up the Soviet defenses while sappers cut paths through the obstacles.

The initial German attacks were driven back, but Manstein was undisturbed, since they were only meant as diversions anyway and were not being pressed hard. While the Soviets were distracted, German assault teams in boats landed behind Red Army lines on the south shore and promptly unhinged the defense. Soviet troops took panic and fled eastward, pursued by German panzers. Many managed to escape over the straits to the mainland, but by 17 May Manstein could report the capture of 170,000 prisoners and large amounts of equipment. All that was left was mopping up.

It was yet another disaster for the Red Army. The commander of the Soviet forces in the region, General D.T. Kozlov, had proven inept, as had Deputy Defense Minister Lev Mekhlis, who had fired off continuous unhelpful orders that did much to make matters worse. Kruschev later said in his usual colorful way that Mekhlis managed to reduce the People's Commissariat of Defense to "a kennel of mad dogs". Stalin sacked both Kozlov and Mekhlis as well as a number of other senior officers associated with the fiasco, but apparently none were shot.

* Now Manstein could begin the second phase of his campaign, Operation STURGEON, the actual capture of Sevastopol. The citizens and soldiers in Sevastopol had spent the winter hunkered down in underground installations and caves to protect themselves from German artillery and bombers. They created an underground society, manufacturing weapons to carry on the fight. A PRAVDA correspondent reported how little girls dressed up potato-masher grenades and played with them as dolls.

The defenders had been feeling optimistic, believing they would be relieved, but the humiliating rout of Soviet forces on the Kerch Peninsula crushed their hopes. The Luftwaffe had been

effective in sinking shipping on the Black Sea and there was little hope of resupply or evacuation.

Manstein knew Sevastopol would be a very tough nut to crack, and so he accumulated 1,300 pieces of artillery to crush Soviet defenses. Large numbers of field guns, prominently the excellent 88 millimeter antiaircraft gun that the Germans had learned also excelled as a heavy antitank gun and as general-purpose artillery, would smash the Soviets when they made a stand, and heavy siege artillery firing massive Roechling concrete-penetrating shells would break up major fortifications. The most powerful of the heavy guns included the 60 centimeter (24 inch) "Karl" mortar; the comparable "Gamma" mortar; and the monster 80 centimeter (31.5 inch) "Dora" railroad gun.

On 2 June 1942, the bombardment began and continued for five days, with the Luftwaffe contributing bombing raids to the storm. On 7 June, seven German and two Rumanian divisions went forward. Many of the attackers believed that the defenders had been pulverized, but they encountered fierce resistance. It took the Germans two days to break the first line of Soviet defenses, and then they focused on the strongpoints of the second defense line.

It took the Germans until 28 June to reduce the second line, with the defenders fighting back stubbornly, continuing to struggle on in the ruins even when the strongpoints had been shattered by the heavy artillery. Isolated in the final strongpoint of the second line of defense, a set of caves built into the Zapun Heights, the Soviets detonated their ammunition dump, killing themselves and the thousands of civilians hiding in the caves rather than giving up.

After that, it was only a matter of time. The Soviets fell back towards the Khersones Peninsula, land's end at the southwest corner of the city, fighting stubborn rearguard actions. Some officers and wounded were removed at night by submarine, but the troops stayed and fought with no hope of rescue. Manstein wrote later: "Whole masses of them rushed at our lines, their arms linked to prevent anyone from hanging back. At their head, urging them on, there were often women and girls of the Komsomol, themselves bearing arms." They were torn to shreds. Coming from the Soviet media, such stories might have been dismissed as the usual overblown propaganda; coming from Manstein there was little doubt that he was telling the complete truth.

The defenders were doomed. The fighting died out on 3 July 1942, after 247 days of siege. Manstein reported capturing 100,000 prisoners and vast quantities of equipment. However, the defense had been heroic, and the Germans had suffered badly. Martyrdom was still not much consolation to the Soviets when the Germans seemed to be invincible once more. With the fall of Sevastopol, the Germans were able to release 200,000 of their own troops for the great offensive to the East, which was now already in motion.

* While the Germans closed in for the kill at Sevastopol, forces had moved into line in preparation for the beginning of BLUE, scheduled for 28 June. Hitler had 72 divisions available for the offensive, 54 of them German. 9 of the German divisions were armored and 7 were mechanized. 8 more divisions were on the way and would be used as a strategic reserve. Half of the Luftwaffe operating in the East was to support the operation.

The forces were split into northern and southern arms. The northern arm was to be under the command of Field Marshal von Bock. Part of his forces were being built up in the region around Kursk, about 145 kilometers (90 miles) north of Kharkov. The German 4th Panzer Army, supported by the German 2nd Army and the Hungarian 2nd Army, was to advance toward Voronezh, a rail and river transport center on the upper Don.

Two days after the start of this initial drive, Bock's heaviest force, the German 6th Army under Paulus, was to move out from its positions near Kharkov, advance across the Donetz, and move in support of the 4th Panzer Army in its drive. The objective of this two-pronged offensive was to swallow up Soviet forces along the front.

Once Voronezh was taken and the Red Army forces in the area dealt with, the German defensive line would be extended to the city to block any Soviet drive from the north, while the offensive continued southeast along the Don, performing a second encirclement operation and then falling on Stalingrad on the Volga to the east. This effort would ensure the destruction of Red Army forces in the region and the construction of a defensive front along the Volga that would protect German gains to the south.

Those gains would be achieved by the southern arm of the offensive, which was being built up to the west of the lower reaches of the Donetz. These forces were to be under the command of Field Marshal Wilhelm von List, though at the last minute Hitler would get rid of List and take formal command himself. Once the northern arm of the offensive had secured the flanks, the German 1st Panzer Army would move across the lower Donetz, seize Rostov, and then move south towards the Caucasus. The 1st Panzer Army would be supported by the German 17th Army, and would have the Italian 8th Army as a reserve.

[7.5] CALM BEFORE THE STORM

* The Red Army high command knew that the Germans were about to begin a major offensive of some sort. While the front lines were quiet, Soviet soldiers kept busy digging in. Stalin believed that the Germans intended to renew their drive on Moscow. There was a major salient to the northwest of the city between Vyazma and Demyansk, left over from the Soviet winter offensive and clearly vulnerable. If the Germans decided to pinch it off, they would also likely move forward to the city itself at the same time.

The Germans encouraged this belief through a well-planned deception operation named Operation KREMLIN (KREML). German divisions on the Moscow front went through the motions of preparing for an offensive, with nobody but the most senior brass aware that nothing was to come of it, while the Luftwaffe stepped up reconnaissance flights over the sector and phoney orders were circulated through radio traffic. The Soviets bit on the bait. In the centralized Soviet system, all control was strongly concentrated in Moscow, and so the city was of absolute political importance. Stalin accordingly granted the defense of Moscow the highest priority, to the detriment of other fronts.

The Soviet defense all along the line was organized into a loose association of eight individual fronts. The "Northwest", "Kalinin", and "Western" Fronts protected Moscow, and contained over half the available frontline strength of the Red Army. Further south were the "Bryansk" and "Southwest" Fronts, which contained a fifth of the Red Army's strength. Since these two fronts were clearly threatened, Stalin had deployed two tank armies into locations where they could move to block a breakthrough pushing towards Moscow.

The "Southern" and "Caucasus" Fronts completed the line to the south, but they were dangerously weak, containing only a tenth of the Red Army's strength. The only saving grace was that Stalin had ordered the fortification of the cities of Rostov, Stalingrad, and Saratov as a back-up defense. Ten armies were also being created to act as a reserve, positioned well in the rear along the entire Soviet line.

Hitler had an anxious moment a little over a week before things were scheduled to jump off. On 19 June, Major Joachim Reichel, a German officer of one of the 6th Army panzer divisions involved in BLUE, decided to fly to 17th Corps headquarters in a Fiesler Storch light utility airplane to confirm details of the operation. Reichel was carrying a short document that provided an outline of major elements of BLUE. The document had been written by Lieutenant General Georg Stumme, commander of the 6th Army's 40th Panzer Corps, to brief his division commanders. It was a clear violation of the Fuehrer's orders, who insisted that all instructions be transmitted verbally.

The Storch got lost, drifted across enemy lines, and was fired on. A round punctured its fuel tank and the aircraft was forced to land. Reichel wasn't missed until that night, and then Stumme, in a frenzy, ordered the missing plane tracked down. A German patrol found it in no-man's-land. There were two bodies buried next to the Storch, and everything of value or interest had been removed from it. The Germans could only assume the worst, and in fact Reichel's document did make its way to Timoshenko and from there to Stalin. Its capture seemed suspiciously convenient and Stalin, not unreasonably, judged it an attempt at deception, though reconnaissance flights did confirm a German buildup as described in the paper.

Still, Hitler had no way of knowing that the Soviets hadn't believed the document. He was furious and heads rolled over the incident. Stumme took the worst punishment, five years in prison, but Reichsmarshal Hermann Goering, who presided over Stumme's court-martial, asked the Fuehrer for clemency in the light of Stumme's excellent service record. It was granted and Stumme was sent to North Africa, where he would be suffer a fatal heart attack in combat at El Alamein in October.

[7.6] RED ARMY STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES

* Since there was no evidence of any serious Soviet preparations to deal with BLUE, the clock ticked away for the offensive on schedule. The Germans were expecting great success, with a fast advance and the capture of entire Soviet armies through encirclement operations. The Red

Army had been too clumsy to escape such traps in the past, and Hitler believed that they would live up to their tradition of defeat.

However, although the Red Army was still no match for the Wehrmacht in terms of leadership and training, the Soviets were in better shape than they had been the previous summer. Thanks to the efforts of the factory workers who had been transplanted to the East, plenty of equipment was reaching the front lines. Red Army soldiers were provided with large numbers of PPSH submachine guns, a crude weapon with short range, but reliable and usable with little training. There were still plenty of the old but effective WWI Mosin-Nagant bolt-action rifles, ugly and intimidating-looking with their long bayonets, available for infantry and snipers; and the standard light machine gun, the Degtyarev DP with its flat round drum magazine and conical muzzle flash suppressor, was an excellent weapon. Medium T-34 and heavy KV tanks were now available in quantity, as was refined and heavier artillery to build up massed batteries.

Red Army infantry were still not anywhere the equal of their German counterparts. Soviet troops were as a rule very tough, able to operate effectively in the worst conditions and often willing to fight to the death, but they lacked tactical flexibility, being inclined to simple-minded and costly massed charges. When things went badly they tended to herd together for a sense of security, which just made them better targets.

Training doctrine had been modified in an attempt to deemphasize the glorious, suicidal, and stupid theatrics promoted by state propaganda and top-down directives in favor of professional and effective infantry tactics, based on the ugly but indisputable premise of combat -- thoroughly understood by the Germans -- that it is much less important for soldiers to die for their country than it is for them to kill for it. However, instilling tactical finesse in the Red Army was, from top to bottom, an uphill struggle, and Red Army doctrine would always emphasize adherence to the overall battle plan at the expense of tactical flexibility.

The troops were not always very well supplied or equipped, but interestingly, the troops and the officers were issued fairly generous rations of vodka, and some Red Army veterans said that in battle they would drink to dull their fear. It should be realized that the practice of getting courage out of a bottle was not unknown in other armies. Soviet soldiers also did not usually drink themselves to the point where they could no longer function effectively in combat, since anyone who did so would face the wrath of his comrades.

Soviet artillerymen were fairly skillful, and were becoming more so with experience, able to lay down heavy and accurate barrages. They were particularly fond of the Katyusha barrage rocket for its ability to generate a crushing and intense barrage as a prelude to a ground assault. Soviet combat engineers were excellent, able to turn towns and forests into fortresses that made every use of terrain and were very hard to crack. They were masters of "maskirovka (concealment and deception)", building bridges that could be sunk during the day and raised at night, or bridges that lay just below the surface of the water, making them difficult to spot.

As proven by the December offensive, the Red Army could move and operate under conditions that immobilized the Germans. Although Soviet horse cavalry might have seemed laughably outdated, and it certainly was for attacks on well-armed German infantry who could mow down

classical cavalry charges with machine guns, horses were irreplaceable for getting around in terrain where no wheeled or even tracked vehicle could go. Horse cavalry could be used for scouting, and horse cavalymen could dismount and fight just as effectively as any infantry, showing up in places where they were least expected. They had many shaggy Siberian Kirghiz ponies that could tolerate very harsh weather. The Germans found Soviet cavalry a painful nuisance. The Red Army not only retained their horse cavalry, they built it up.

The ground forces were backed up in the air by the Red Air Force, the VVS, which was organized in "air armies" that were focused on battlefield support. Although with the return of good weather the Luftwaffe had been able to regain general air superiority, the VVS was rebuilding strength. Front-line units were now being equipped with modern aircraft, including the sturdy Shturmovik; the agile Yakovlev Yak-1 fighter, still not quite the match for the German Messerschmitt but a big step forward; the American Bell P-39 Airacobra; and the trim, fast Petlyakov Pe-2 twin-engine light bomber. Some of the aircraft were not such prizes: the Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-3 was designed much like an air racer and was fast at altitude, but it was not very maneuverable; and the Lavochkin LaGG-1 and LaGG-3 were underpowered and treacherous.

Soviet industry was working hard to improve on the designs and pour them out in quantity. Although the VVS still suffered from rigid and obsolete tactical concepts, new ideas were starting to spread through the organization, and was striving to bring up its standard of professionalism. An American general who visited the USSR on Lend-Lease business at about this time was given a tour of a forward air base. Conditions there were primitive, with the aircraft using a sod runway and facilities based on log and earth and tents, but all of it was superbly camouflaged and the general found everything being done crisply by the numbers.

The officers that led the troops on the ground and in the air were also not the equal of their German counterparts, but things were improving. Soviet officers had a generally good grasp of how to move and supply troops under difficult conditions, as well as the skills of concealment and deception. Red Army officers were hindered by a system that discouraged initiative and which had eliminated the best among them. However, many officers who had been sacked or had managed to survive in the Gulag were put back into service, and the authority of their sometimes troublesome "shadows", the political commissars that looked over their shoulders, was being trimmed back.

The commissar system had actually been abolished back in 1940, but Stalin decided to reinstate it in July 1941, after the Nazi invasion, to ride herd on the officer corps. After the fiasco on the Kerch Peninsula in May 1942, which owed much to the bungling of Mekhlis and other officials in the defense commissariat, the word went down from the top that the role of the political commissars was not to control combat officers but to help them get their jobs done. In October 1942, this modified role would be formalized by Decree 307 that defined political commissars as "political deputies" to the officers, but the commissars had got the drift well before that. In Stalin's land, sensitivity to the shifting wind was a survival skill.

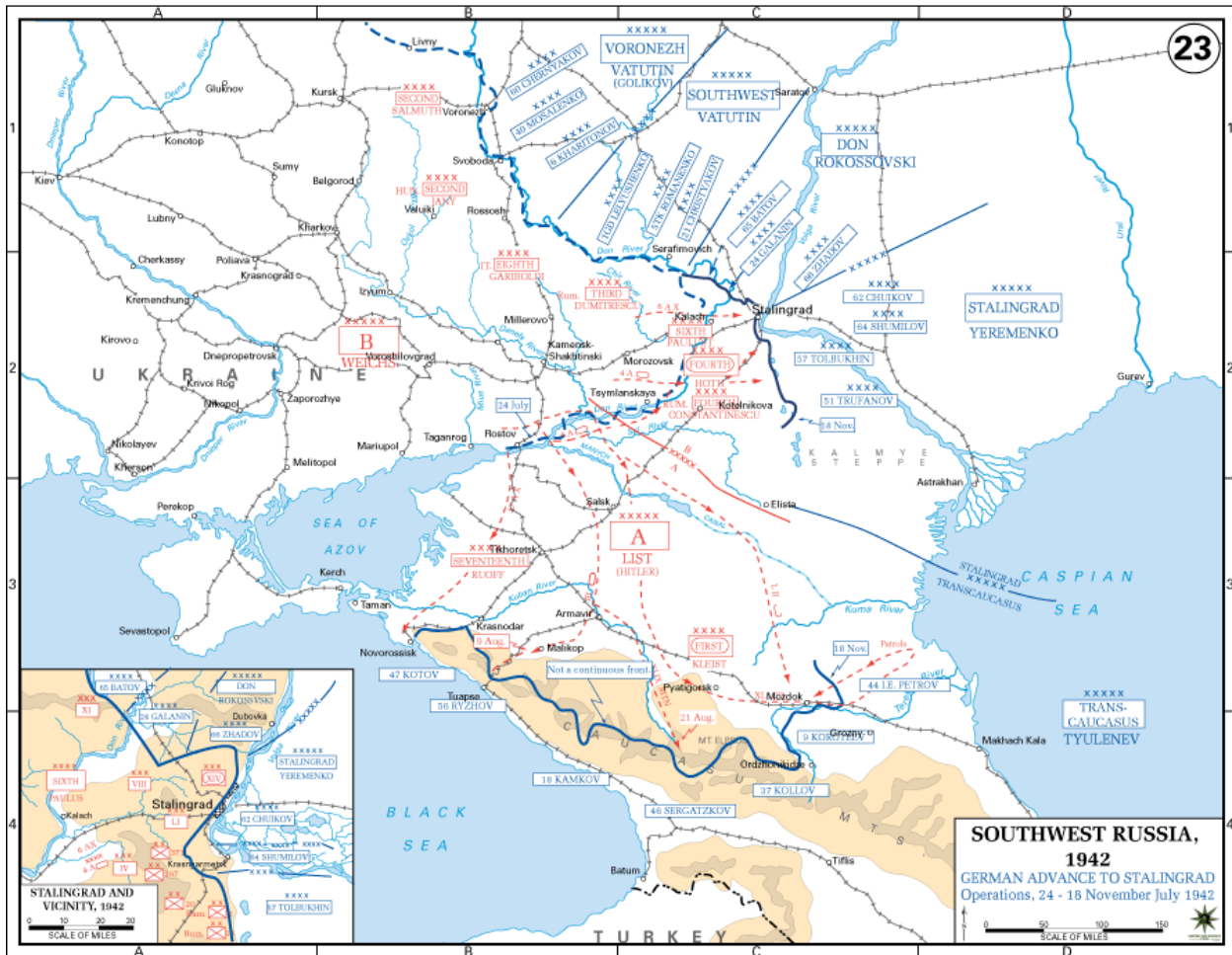
Stalin craved control and loosened the leash on the officer corps only reluctantly, but it had become obvious that the choice between having military officers or political commissars running

things was the choice between winning or losing the war. Although the political commissars found out after their effective demotion that they were not held in much respect by the rest of the Red Army -- it is an interesting comment on human nature that they could have been surprised -- the new arrangement actually proved, on the whole, an asset to the Red Army.

The political commissars -- working through their lieutenants, the "politruks" or "political officers", and their flunkies in the ranks, known as "komsorgs" -- not only handled the indoctrination of the troops and ensured that they acted as good Communists, they filled the role of chaplains as well, helping soldiers to resolve personal problems or difficulties back home, and arranged sports matches and entertainments. Their duties also included inspiring the men in combat, and many political commissars were killed in action.

There was, in short, some cause for Soviet optimism in the fighting that was certain to break out somewhere along the front as summer approached. There were still causes for fear as well, and what actually would happen remained to be seen.

[7.7] THE GERMANS DRIVE EAST



* Plan BLUE began on schedule on 28 June, only a few days more than a year after the initial invasion of the Soviet Union. The 4th Panzer Army led a drive into the Soviet Bryansk Front, which was comparatively strong. The attack began with a heavy artillery barrage, supported by well-planned air strikes into the Soviet rear. The Luftwaffe 4th Air Fleet had received priority for aircraft to support the offensive and quickly gained battlefield air superiority.

The Germans plunged through the Soviet line. This initial assault was followed up by the drive of the German 6th Army into the weaker Southwest Front, which advanced just as rapidly. In fact, the advance was *too* rapid. The Red Army was doing little or nothing to contest the advance. This was totally unlike the Soviets and many German troops found it odd. What troops find odd, they instinctively find it unsettling and potentially dangerous as well.

Timoshenko was actually falling back as fast as he could. Having discovered that the papers captured from Major Reichel's Storch were true and not a deception, the Kremlin knew what the German plan really was. Stalin was now doing what he should have done a year earlier: abandoning an indefensible line and falling back to a better position for a stand. Since the immediate objective of the northern arm of the German assault was Voronezh, the Red Army

would fight a delaying action there, buying time for forces to concentrate at Stalingrad, which would be turned into a fortress on which the Germans might hopefully smash themselves to pieces.

Some German generals quickly realized what was going on, and General Paulus received suggestions that the plan be modified to send strong elements of his 6th Army due east to the Don in order to cut off the fleeing Red Army. Paulus, a competent staff officer who was reluctant to improvise in the field, did not want to disrupt a complicated plan like BLUE and ordered that 6th Army continue northwest to link up with the 4th Panzer Army.

However, it was very apparent that the Red Army had slipped out of the trap, and on 3 July Hitler flew to Bock's field headquarters and gave him authorization to abandon the drive on Voronezh and turn southwest. The result of this change in plans lent some credibility to the reluctance of Paulus to make serious changes to a major offensive in mid-stream. Bock ordered forces to go east and cut off the Soviets, bypassing Voronezh; and then, on finding out his forces were close to the city, changed his mind on 4 July and ordered its capture anyway. Since the Red Army was on the run, seizing Voronezh wouldn't be too much trouble, and then the offensive columns could continue east.

In fact, as mentioned, the Red Army had every intention of putting up a fight for Voronezh, and the place was full of Soviet troops. They were feeling stubborn and cranky and didn't give up the city until 13 July, with the survivors withdrawing in some approximation of good order across the Don. The Germans captured few prisoners.

* On that same day, 13 July, Hitler returned to Bock's headquarters and, impatient with the progress of the offensive, ordered a major rearrangement of BLUE. Although the southern arm of the offensive was originally supposed to wait until the northern arm had secured the flanks, Hitler ordered it to go ahead at once as it was essential that the oil fields of the Caucasus be seized immediately. In addition, the Fuehrer ordered that Hermann Hoth's 4th Panzer Army be sent south to assist. The changes in BLUE up to this time had been causing some confusion, but the reorganization all but threw the plan to the winds. Bock protested and was immediately sacked, to be replaced by General Maximilian von Weichs. 4th Panzer was sent south. Since it had to travel a long distance, that meant it took precious fuel and supplies away from the 6th Army, rendering it immobile for the moment.

To the south, Kleist and his 1st Panzer had jumped across the lower Donetz into the Soviet Southern Front and pushed on towards Rostov. The Germans reached the city on 22 July. The Red Army had been ordered to perform a delaying action in the city to buy time for withdrawal of forces southwest to a defensive line that was then being built in great haste. NKVD troops and engineers ordered to defend Rostov had been working on a double line of defenses when the Germans arrived. The defenders did not try very hard to hold the incomplete outer line, and the Germans entered the city with no great difficulty.

If any German soldiers thought the lack of resistance meant they would have no trouble capturing Rostov, they quickly found out they were very wrong. Once they were well inside the city they found themselves in a deadly maze of barricades and tank obstacles, littered with mines

and devious booby-traps, while Soviet troops tossed gasoline bombs -- "Molotov cocktails" -- on tanks from rooftops and snipers picked off German troops from the windows of buildings. The NKVD men fought to the death, and the Germans found that if they didn't guard their own wounded, the enemy would sneak out of the shadows and kill them with knives or entrenching tools or bricks or whatever else was handy.

The Germans divided the core of the city into four sectors and then methodically cleaned the sectors out, first smashing them with artillery and then sending a line of assault troops across to sweep up Soviet resistance. A secondary line of troops followed behind to clean up anything the first line had missed. The job was finished 24 July, good time considering the difficulty of the task, but still more delay than the Germans could afford. In any case, the Germans then began to sweep southeast towards the Caucasus.

* By this time, the two arms of the offensive had been designated "Army Group A", in the south, and "Army Group B", in the north. To the north, Army Group B continued to drive east, encountering very little resistance. As before, many German officers found this disturbing. Hitler interpreted the lack of resistance to mean that the Red Army was on its last legs. Others suspected it meant the Soviets were not the easy prey they had been.

In reality, the withdrawal of Soviet troops in front of the German offensive was by no means entirely orderly. Performing a combat withdrawal is not trivial -- some generals claim it is the most difficult of all combat operations -- and Timoshenko and his staff hadn't done a very good job of organizing it. Some units fell back in good order, others in a state of panicked flight. Many Soviet troops were so unfamiliar with the concept and practice of a strategic withdrawal that they simply assumed the Red Army had been routed once more, and behaved accordingly.

The movement of Soviet troops east was funneled into the Don bend, where the river changed its direction of flow from southeast to southwest. There was a critical bridge at Kalach, directly west of Stalingrad, and officers armed with submachine guns went to the bridge to intercept troops withdrawing east and get them into some sort of order. Everyone was expecting the Germans to show up at any moment.

Time passed and no Germans appeared. In fact, the 6th Army was all but out of gas and had to pause, as it turned out for more than two weeks, before their supply situation improved. For whatever reasons, Timoshenko decided that this was an opportunity to make a stand on the west side of the Don, and put the better part of several armies on the far side of the river.

On the face of it, a superficial glance at the west bank of the Don bend immediately suggests a dangerous trap, and that was what it turned out to be. Paulus might not have been good at improvising but he was skillful at conducting a setpiece battle, and when he finally got fuel he launched a pincers movement that snapped shut on 8 August, trapping over 70,000 Soviet prisoners. The Germans found it just like the good old days. Timoshenko was not arrested and stayed in uniform, but he would never call the shots again.

There was really nothing in front of Paulus to block a further move to Stalingrad, but he spent two more weeks mopping up around Kalach and waiting for Hoth to return. 4th Panzer's trip

south had been a waste of time. Kleist had no particular need for the reinforcements, and so Hoth found himself going back north again -- less one of his two panzer corps that had still been ordered to remain in the south. The Germans didn't move across the Don in force until 21 August, erecting 22 pontoon bridges to support the drive. Paulus was confident, believing that he could simply walk into Stalingrad, but the Soviets had been given precious breathing space.

[8.0] The Battle For Stalingrad (1)

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* The German advance in the summer of 1942 finally came to a halt at Stalingrad, on the banks of the Volga river. There the Red Army made a stand, and the two opponents became bogged down in the nastiest sort of grinding street fighting.

[8.1] STALINGRAD BRACES FOR THE DEFENSE

* While the German Army Group B was flooding across the Don, reaching for Stalingrad only some 58 kilometers (36 miles) away, Army Group A was deep in the Caucasus region, having reached the foothills of the mountains on 9 August. Although BLUE had been mismanaged and was well behind schedule, things seemed to still be going well for the Germans, and many of the troops thought that success was within reach.

However, as far as Stalin was concerned, if Hitler wanted Stalingrad he was going to pay for it. The Red Army was not going to fight a delaying action at the city -- it was going to hold it or die trying. If anyone in the ranks had any different ideas, he was likely to die anyway. In late July, Stalin had signed "Secret Order 227", nicknamed "Not One Step Backwards", making unauthorized retreats punishable by death.

This principle was applied on a broad scale. The NKVD of course operated in the Red Army to root out spies and traitors, with the definition of "traitor" being dangerously broad, through what were then called the "Special Departments". The Special Departments created "blocking units" equipped with machine guns to mow down soldiers who thought to flee a battle without being ordered to do so. Blocking units were an ancient practice, not unique to the Russians, and had been used with particular enthusiasm by Trotsky during the civil war. Stalin liked the idea as well. Many of the people in the blocking units were hardened criminals who would kill anyone without much hesitation. There are perfectly believable stories that on occasions there were stand-up battles between front-line troops and blocking units.

Order 227 also formally introduced "shtraftbaty (penal battalions)", which were made up of soldiers who broken the rules in some way. The penal battalions were suicide units, used as the leading edge of attacks. There were even penal squadrons in the air arm. The term of service in a penal battalion was three months, but the likelihood of surviving the term was small. Surprisingly, many penal battalions would fight with spirit and determination. Possibly it was a point of pride to die well, or possibly it was the realization that the only slim chance for survival under such circumstances was to outfight the enemy. A serious enough wound was enough to obtain release from a penal battalion, but security officers were careful to check to see that the wound wasn't self-inflicted, or inflicted by blocking units. If they passed, the comment ATONED WITH OWN BLOOD was added to their official records. The same consolation, for whatever it was worth, was also added to the records of the slain. However, the combat

distinctions of penal battalions were ignored in official Red Army records, which many veterans felt was an insult to the heroism often displayed.

Despite the brutality of Order 227, the blocking units, and the penal battalions, even some war veterans who served in the ranks defended these decisions as necessary. An army that has often been defeated acquires a tradition of defeat; breaking that mindset requires extraordinary measures. Stalin was the sort of person who took whatever measures he thought necessary, no matter how brutal.

* Stalingrad was a modern Soviet city with a peacetime population of a half million, an industrial center and a major manufacturing site for tanks and other military vehicles. It sat on the west bank of the Volga, which flowed to the southwest at that place. The city was built up along the river, with a number of important -- or soon to become important -- sites arranged as follows from north to south, linked by rail lines paralleling the river:

- The "Tractor Factory", a huge industrial complex that was now producing tanks.
- The "Barricades Plant", another big industrial complex that manufactured small arms and ammunition.
- The "Red October Steelworks", a third big industrial complex that also turned out small arms and ammunition.
- The "Lazur Chemical Plant", a smaller industrial complex.
- "Mamayev Hill", which provided a central view over the area and was of obvious military importance as "higher ground" to anybody who set eyes on it.
- "Red Square", the center of the city, which was surrounded by government buildings. This section of the town featured deep ravines. The main ferry landing was on the bank of the Volga to the east of Red Square, while the main railroad station -- of course named "Railroad Station #1" -- was just to the west of Red Square.
- While the part of the city to the south of Red Square was mostly residential, a warren of small cottages dotted with a few Russian Orthodox churches, there was a second railroad station there, of course named "Railroad Station #2".
- The southern end of the city was marked by a prominent grain elevator. It must have had an official name, but nobody paid it much mind; it would simply become known as *the* "Grain Elevator". As with any other common landmark whose name would acquire a special significance in a battle -- the Sunken Road, the Stone Wall, the Peach Orchard, the Angle -- the name would become capitalized in blood.

On 2 August 1942 Stalin assigned the defense of Stalingrad to Lieutenant General Andrey Ivanovich Yeremenko. Yeremenko, a big Russian bear of a man, had been brought from Siberia in late 1941 and had been wounded in the leg in the fighting with the Germans that followed. His wound was still bothering him, but he told Stalin that he felt fit to go into combat. When someone observed that Yeremenko was still limping, Stalin simply commented: "We will consider that Comrade Yeremenko has fully recovered."

Yeremenko arrived at Stalingrad on 4 August, where he met with his political commissar, Nikita Krushchev. Although political commissars could be a nuisance, Krushchev was bright and

energetic, if sometimes erratic, and they made a good team. They set shop in a concealed bunker in Tsaritsa Gorge in the vicinity of Red Square, and worked hard to prepare the defense of the city.

[8.2] CHURCHILL VISITS MOSCOW

* In the wake of Molotov's visit to the West, the Americans and the British conducted intensive discussions on the possibility of a landing in Europe under Operation SLEDGEHAMMER. The British were cool to the idea, to put it mildly, and the reality soon became clear that the invasion could not be performed in 1942. Churchill was planning a visit to Cairo, and decided to go on to the USSR via Tehran to break the news personally to Stalin. Simply handing the message on through the British embassy was out of the question, it would tell the Soviets that the British didn't take the matter seriously. Churchill had no illusions it was going to be a pleasant visit with Stalin, comparing it to carrying a lump of ice to the North Pole.

Stalin already had reason to be unhappy: after the Murmansk convoy codenamed "PQ 17" had been all but slaughtered in early July, with 24 ships out of the 33 in the convoy sunk, the Murmansk convoys were suspended until aircraft carrier escort could be provided, and would not resume until "PQ 18" in early September. The interruption was relatively brief but it came at a time when the Soviet Union was under intense pressure, and the suspension reinforced Stalin's belief that the British and Americans were letting the Soviets twist in the wind.

Averell Harriman thought it would be a good idea to have an American representative meet Stalin along with Churchill, and Roosevelt wired his consent, leaving the agenda up to Harriman. Harriman caught up with Churchill in Cairo, and the two men arrived in Moscow on the afternoon of 12 August 1942.

Churchill insisted on promptly meeting with Stalin, where the prime minister explained to Koba why SLEDGEHAMMER wasn't going to happen. Stalin was unhappy, with Harriman reporting that the Soviet leader replied "with a degree of bluntness almost amounting to insult", deriding his allies for their timidity. However, Koba was pleased when Churchill told him about plans to intensify the bombing campaign against Germany, with the Americans planning to throw their aerial weight into the campaign, and was intrigued with the plans for TORCH, the invasion of North Africa. Stalin somewhat surprised his guests by exclaiming: "May God help this enterprise to succeed!" -- an odd comment from an atheistic Communist. Harriman learned that it was not an unusual remark from Stalin and that it was apparently a habit left over from his seminary days.

The visitors met with Stalin again the next day, 13 August, with British senior staff officers, who had arrived later than Churchill and Harriman, in attendance. Koba went into his "hard cop" act, complaining at length and accusing his allies of cowardice: "You British are afraid of fighting. You should not think the Germans are supermen. You will have to fight sooner or later. You cannot win a war without fighting."

Churchill had of course been expecting something along this line and was prepared for it. His famous eloquence was by no means entirely spontaneous -- those in his close company could sometimes hear him addressing the House of Commons from his bathtub -- and no doubt he had written the script in his mind during the long trip east. Churchill started with a tactful but hardly meek reply: "I pardon that remark only on account of the bravery of the Russian troops." He then went on to smother Stalin with a long speech, which Harriman described as "brilliant".

The translator could barely keep up. Stalin, realizing that he was outmatched -- nobody had ever accused him of brilliant oratory -- decided to retreat, laughing and politely cutting Churchill off. "Your words are of no importance. What is important is your spirit." The rest of the discussions that day remained tense, but on the third day, 15 August, Stalin was back to playing "soft cop" and all was cordial. The two leaders even had an extended late-night discussion over drinks.

Churchill's military chief of staff, Field Marshal Alan Brooke, had been in attendance for the last two days of meetings. Churchill felt he was making headway with Stalin, but Brooke, a skeptic by nature, was not so convinced, writing in his diary: "It was very interesting meeting [Stalin], and I was much impressed by his astuteness, and his crafty cleverness. He is a realist ... The two leaders are poles apart as human beings ... [Churchill] appealed to sentiments in Stalin which I do not think exist there." At a formal dinner during the sessions, Brooke found Stalin "quite lively", judging him an "outstanding man" but "not an attractive one ... He has got an unpleasantly cold, crafty, dead face, and whenever I look at him I can imagine his sending off people to their doom without ever turning a hair."

On Churchill's return to Britain, the prime minister wrote President Roosevelt that he was "definitely encouraged" by his visit to Moscow, judging that having grasped the nettle and gone through the trouble to hand Stalin bad news personally, he had minimized the damage: "Now they know the worst, and having made their protest are entirely friendly."

The idea that Stalin could be "entirely friendly" was an exaggeration approaching delusion. Stalin, as Brooke had concluded, was a realist, and Churchill's deference in traveling to Moscow to meet with Stalin counted for little, possibly nothing, in comparison with the test that the Soviet dictator faced in Stalingrad. The reality was that the USSR was essentially on its own. Stalingrad would stand or fall on the skill and determination of the Red Army and the Soviet nation.

[8.3] THE GERMANS ENTER STALINGRAD

* Even before Paulus moved across the Don in force, Hoth and his 4th Panzer Army was advancing on Stalingrad from the south after their futile "vacation" to Army Group A. On 20 August 1942, Hoth was about 32 kilometers (20 miles) south of the city, where he found his line of advance obstructed by terrain crossed by ravines and a line of hills.

Hoth was a tough, aggressive commander, intimidating in appearance though basically paternalistic. His men called him "Papa"; anybody who has ever been in the military knows that

a commander with a nickname like "Papa" or "Pops" commands the total loyalty of his troops. Bad terrain was troublesome but it wasn't going to stop him. He moved forward.

What did stop Hoth were a number of divisions from the Soviet Sixty-Fourth Army, braced by tanks and under the command of Major General M.S. Shumilov. The Soviets were holding the line of hills and showed no inclination to budge, though Hoth hit them again and again over the next few days, with nothing to show for it but mounting casualty lists.

While Hoth was engaged in this painful exercise, on 23 August 6th Army forces began their advance east from their bridgehead over the Don. It became a hot, dry summer day as the sun rose in the sky. The 6th Army's 16th Panzer Division, under Lieutenant General Hans Hube, charged ahead, encountering only ineffective Red Army resistance that was quickly brushed aside.

From his bunker in Tsaritsa Gorge, Yeremenko tried to deal with panicked officers and coordinate a response to the German attack. While he was engaged in this exercise, two military engineers came to the bunker and proudly announced that after two days of work, they had completed a pontoon bridge spanning the Volga, which was 1.6 kilometers (a mile) wide at Stalingrad. Yeremenko immediately told them to destroy the bridge. They were shocked, but he repeated the order: "I said to destroy it. And quickly."

Yeremenko had no real confidence in holding Stalingrad for the moment. If the Germans seized an intact crossing over the Volga there might be no stopping them. The bridge had to go.

By nightfall, Hube and his panzers had reached the Volga, on the outskirts of Stalingrad north of the Tractor Factory. Hube set up a defensive perimeter, planning to move on the Tractor Factory come sunrise. That night, following up air raids conducted during the day, the German 4th Air Fleet pounded Stalingrad with 600 aircraft, dropping high explosive and incendiaries. The area around Red Square was flattened, fires raged out of control since the municipal water system had been disabled, and tens of thousands of civilians died. Most of the surviving citizens fled across the Volga if they could, though many of the fugitives were killed by attacks of Luftwaffe aircraft.

When the dawn came on 24 August, Hube was confident. He was an aggressive and combative commander, as hinted by the artificial black hand he had obtained in the First World War. His troops greatly respected him for his toughness, clarity of thinking, and pragmatism, calling him "der Mensch (the Man)". He moved forward rapidly at first, to abruptly run into a wall of steel and fire that stopped his panzers cold. Yeremenko had thrown together a defensive line during the night using everybody and everything he could scrape up, including Red Navy Marines from the Soviet Far Eastern Fleet, plus T-34 tanks driven right off the end of the Tractor Factory assembly line into the fighting. Some of the tanks were handled by the workers who had built them, including women.

Hube tried again on 25 August and did no better. Yeremenko continued to scrape up weapons and reinforcements, and in fact was able to launch counterattacks that by 29 August had not only inflicted serious losses on Hube's force, but had bottled up 16th Panzer against the Volga. Hube

wanted to break out and escape to the west, but orders from the Fuehrer dictated that he hold his ground and wait to be relieved.

* To the south of the city, Hoth had finally grown tired of smashing his head against the "damned hills" that blocked his line of advance. He put infantry onto the fighting line to keep the Soviets busy, then shifted his panzers southwest 48 kilometers (30 miles) where they could get around the inconvenient terrain. After two days of preparations, 4th Panzer Army moved out and was rewarded with rapid success. By 31 August, Hoth's panzers had penetrated the outer line of Stalingrad's defenses and were threatening to drive a wedge between the Soviet Sixty-Second Army in Stalingrad and the Sixty-Fourth Army to the south of the city. Once isolated, the Germans would be able to grind down the Sixty-Second Army and take Stalingrad.

Hoth's success meant nothing if it wasn't followed up, however, and Paulus wasn't in any hurry. 6th Army didn't link up with 4th Panzer for three more days. In the meantime, Yeremenko had stabilized his defense. It was a nasty fight and not all the troops were sufficiently motivated. After one infantry division began to bleed away deserters, the divisional commander assembled his troops, lectured them on the need to show some guts, and then walked down the front rank, shooting each tenth man in the head with his revolver until he had emptied all six chambers. It was an ancient custom, what the Romans called "decimation", and it had the desired inspirational effect.

Stalin was of course paying close attention to the battle, and on 27 August he appointed Georgy Zhukov, arguably his best general, to take overall control of military operations in the region. For the moment, all Zhukov could do was scrape up reinforcements, weapons, and supplies and get them to Yeremenko as fast as possible. As Zhukov wrote later: "With the fall of Stalingrad, the enemy command would be able to cut off the south of the country from the center. The Supreme Command was sending to Stalingrad all that it was possible to send." It was a purely reactive response to the situation, but ideas for possibilities were circulating through Zhukov's head.

Hoth renewed his drive on 8 September. By 10 September, his panzers had reached the Volga below the city, to the south of the Grain Elevator. The defenses were tough and he went no further. By this time, all of 6th Army was in line and the city had been invested, with Hube and his 16th Panzer finally relieved. The Soviet Sixty-Second Army was now closed up inside Stalingrad. To the south of the city, the Sixty-Fourth Army held a line southwest of the Volga, but was unable to link back up with Stalingrad's defenders.

Yeremenko was finding that trying to direct the battle from so close to the fighting line was proving counterproductive, and Kruschev suggested to Stalin over the phone that command be shifted to the rear, on the east bank of the Volga. Stalin rejected the idea, saying that it would demoralize the troops, but Kruschev pressed his case and Stalin finally gave in.

There still had to be someone to conduct the battle on the spot in Stalingrad. The commander of the Sixty-Second Army, Lieutenant General Aleksandr Lopatin, wasn't up to the job, having clearly lost his nerve. On 12 September he was sacked, to be replaced by General Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov, then the deputy commander of the Sixty-Fourth Army. Chuikov went to Yeremenko's headquarters that night in an American-built jeep, with the flames from the burning

city across the Volga so bright that he didn't need to turn on his headlights. He was assigned the command and Kruschev asked him pointedly: "Comrade Chuikov, how do you interpret your orders?"

He replied simply: "We will defend the city or die in the attempt."

Chuikov was a model Russian peasant -- coarse, tough, practical, absolutely stubborn, nasty-tempered and rough on his subordinates to the point of giving them hefty blows his fists or his walking stick on occasion, for which even Stalin reprimanded him. He was the ideal man to command the defense of Stalingrad.

* While Army Group B invested Stalingrad, Army Group A enjoyed an easy drive south towards the Caucasus, with the Soviets providing little opposition. The Germans had an easy time of it until they reached the Terek River, running along the foothills of the Caucasus, at the end of August.

Part of the problem was that Kleist's supply lines were overextended and he could not get fuel for his panzers. The bigger part of the problem was that the Soviets had sensibly decided to give up undefendable land and focus all their efforts on building up their defenses along the mountain regions where their military resources would have the greatest advantage. The local population was put to work, digging hundreds of kilometers of trenches and antitank ditches and tens of thousands of pillboxes and strong points.

Kleist had really won nothing. The Germans had occupied Maikop, an oil production center, but the Soviets had done a thorough job of destroying it and all the invaders got for their trouble was choking clouds of smoke. All through September, German mountain troops probed for a breakthrough. Nazi propaganda films played up videos of German soldiers raising their banner on top of high peaks, but prying the Red Army out of such fortifications was going to take more than small groups of mountain troops. In October, snow would begin falling and that would be the end of serious military operations in the region until spring.

[8.4] THE STRUGGLE IN THE RUINS: SEPTEMBER 1942

* General Chuikov had little time to become comfortable, if such a word could be used in such circumstances, to his new command in Stalingrad. The next morning, 13 September, the Germans began the day with a heavy artillery barrage, followed up with an assault with panzers and infantry. Chuikov had only about 55,000 men to deal with about 100,000 Germans.

Paulus focused his attack on the center of Stalingrad, around Mamayev Hill and Railroad Station #1, while Hoth kept up the pressure on the south end of the city. Paulus wanted to cut Stalingrad in half; once that was done, the Germans would control the main ferry landing and the defense of the rest of the city would be unhinged. Resistance was stiff and his troops made slow progress

that day, though Chuikov was forced to move his headquarters from Mamayev Hill to the bunker in Tsaritsa Gorge.

The morning after that, 14 September, Chuikov counterattacked, pressing the Germans back until Stuka dive bombers -- "musicians" or "screechers" as Red troops called them -- showed up and pounded the Soviets, breaking the counterattack and apparently breaking the defense as well. German panzers and troops moved forward rapidly into the center of the city, and it seemed for a moment that they had all but won the battle.

The Germans quickly found out that the Soviets had not given up; they had simply changed tactics. As had been proven in Rostov, the Red Army might not be so skillful at the battles of maneuver in which the German Army excelled, but had a much better understanding of house-to-house fighting. Chuikov, who had something of a droll sense of humor, referred to his command as the "Stalingrad Academy of Street Fighting", and had booklets prepared to give new arrivals a quick course of instruction on the details of the art.

The streets were full of rubble that blocked the panzers or funneled them into avenues that turned out to be traps, with the land carefully mapped out, ringed with anti-tank guns, and covered by pre-targeted heavy artillery positioned on the east shore of the Volga. Red Army sappers crawled out at night to plant mines everywhere, which badly hindered German armor, and Luftwaffe bombers could no longer reliably determine who to bomb -- though they continued to pulverize the rubble behind the front lines for whatever little good that did them. Chuikov's men built "mini-fortresses" in the ruins, staying as close as possible to the enemy to prevent the Germans from using heavy artillery and aerial bombing to root them out. It wasn't hard to build strongpoints in the ruins of the city, and it was easy to conceal them in the rubble.

The little fortifications were linked with trenches and arranged to provide interlocking fields of fire. Machine gunners would wait until the enemy was well into a "killbox" before opening fire. Mortars set up in the upper floors of buildings provided precision artillery support, and antitank guns were set up where there was a clear field of fire to deal with enemy armor and add firepower to infantry fights. In some cases, the guns were dismantled, the pieces carried through the ruins, and then reassembled. When the Germans cleared one strongpoint, the Soviets would simply fall back a bit and build another.

The big Soviet guns were sited across the Volga, with artillery spotters moving in the ruins of the city to pinpoint targets for them. Duels were sometimes conducted between Soviet and German batteries, with the German guns sited well behind their own lines. To provide more immediate fire support, Soviet trucks fitted with Katyusha rocket launcher racks were hidden near the riverbank. They were driven out to dump a load of rockets on a target, and then driven back again before German counterfire fell on their position.

Despite the endless bombardments, it was still an infantryman's fight, with Red Army assault teams led by troops armed only with grenades, knives, and entrenching tools. They would rush a strongpoint and create confusion, to be followed up by better-armed soldiers who would clean up after them. The Germans also formed up assault teams, similar to those devised late in World

War I, consisting usually of ten armed infantry braced with a machine gun, light mortar, and flame-throwers.

The environment was so cluttered with wreckage that Soviet infiltration teams were often able to sneak around the Germans and ambush them. Soviet troops would move quietly through back alleys or sewers, or even build a "tunnel" through a row of buildings by simply smashing holes in the internal walls and then showing up in unexpected places. Sometimes the infiltration teams would go snatch Germans as "tongues" for intelligence; German troops would turn around and find out that one of them had simply disappeared, dragged off through a sewer to be worked over by Special Department interrogation teams. German propaganda describing what would happen to soldiers unlucky enough to be captured by the Bolsheviks actually proved counterproductive, since German prisoners were often already terrified before anybody laid a finger on them. If they didn't talk then, they quickly found out that their propaganda wasn't far wrong.

Snipers picked off the incautious and dueled with each other at times. The best snipers scored hundreds of kills. Propaganda on both sides played up their snipers to the point where the profession became something of a cult, and in the Red Army they got the best rations and supplies. Soviet snipers would make a dummy out of rags and whatever to provoke Germans into taking shots at it and giving away their positions. One Red Army sniper cleverly rigged white flags to pop up from the rubble when he pulled on a string and then nailed Germans who stuck their head up to tell the Russian to come on over.

The Germans called the struggle "Rattenkrieg": war of the rats. The fighting line could be the wall inside a building, or different floors in the building. There was no telling when a soldier might encounter that one deadly bullet, or where it might come from. The Germans shot at any noise in the night, and there were a lot of friendly-fire casualties on both sides, both from jumpy infantry and from misdirected mortar or artillery shells. The environment was a waking nightmare, with the cries of the wounded proving particularly disturbing. One German wrote in his diary: "It's not a human sound, just the dull cry of suffering of a wounded animal."

Astoundingly, there were still thousands of civilians hiding in the ruins, trying to survive. Small children were sometimes adopted by units on either sides, mostly as mascots, though sometimes they were used to run errands. Soviet troops were ordered to fire on children if they were clearly aiding the Germans, though it is difficult -- if not impossible -- to believe that any but the most vicious Red Army soldiers did more than fire a few shots in their direction to make the kids take cover.

For the civilians, for the soldiers on both sides, food and water could be hard to come by, sickness was common, and everyone was infested with lice, which the Germans called "little partisans". Soldiers did what they could to make themselves as comfortable as the situation allowed. During lulls in the fighting the troops on the two sides would sometimes chat and make little deals, trading a pot of water for some cigarettes or such, and then go right back to killing each other. In some cases, after both sides watched the bodies of their comrades pile up in a fight for some insignificant bit of ruin, they would decide that neither side was going to win, resulting in a local cease-fire.

* Mamayev Hill and Railroad Station #1 changed hands repeatedly that day; that night; and the next day, 15 September. Chuikov had to scrape the bottom of the barrel to hold the ferry landing. He had to hold the landing since there were 10,000 reinforcements waiting to cross the Volga and join the battle, in the form of the Thirteenth Guards Division under Major General Alexander Ilyich Rodimtsev. Rodimtsev was a Spanish Civil War veteran and had won distinctions in the fighting since Hitler's invasion; he was a person of intellect, humor, and by all evidence total fearlessness. His troops were well trained, highly motivated, and adored him, fearing wounds to a large extent because that might mean being transferred to another command.

The Thirteenth Guards managed to get across the river that night. Chuikov even ordered NKVD units into the fight. Normally it was the NKVD that ordered the regular army around, and Beria had promised to crush any Red Army officer who presumed to tell NKVD units what to do, but Stalin's insistence on holding Stalingrad meant that the usual rules were suspended. That didn't mean that there weren't still plenty of NKVD troops in the rear, quick to shoot anyone who even resembled a deserter -- a practice which met with Chuikov's complete approval.

The Soviets retook Mamayev Hill on the morning of 16 September and dug in to make sure they kept it. However, the fighting didn't die out, and what was left of Railroad Station #1 kept changing hands again and again. On 17 September, Chuikov was forced to pull his headquarters back again, to a dugout on the river banks in the factory district. However, over the next few days the Germans push in the center of the city ground down to a complete halt from sheer exhaustion.

* The fight in the south of the city remained in full burn. The Germans managed to make progress until they came up to the Grain Elevator on 16 September and immediately found themselves in the ugliest sort of grinding close-quarters fight. The defenders consisted of about 50 men under Lieutenant Andrey Khozyanov, with their only heavy armament being two Maxim-type machine guns and two Degtyarev PTRD anti-tank rifles. The PTRD was a big, single-shot bolt-action weapon that looked like a piece of plumbing -- not much more than a nuisance against any serious armor, but firing a big 14.5 millimeter bullet with a lot of range and hitting power that could punch through almost anything else.

The troops in the Grain Elevator had been ordered to fight to the death, and almost all of them did. When a German officer came forward under a white flag with an interpreter and arrogantly demanded that them to surrender or else, they told him to go straight to hell.

On 20 September, the Germans brought up about a dozen tanks and pounded the Grain Elevator into a ruin. The Soviets fought on in the rubble. Resistance didn't begin to crumble until 22 September, when the Germans were finally able to move forward, with the survivors of the defense finally running off. The Germans found the corpses of most of the defenders, many of them Red Marine "sea devils", and took only a handful of wounded prisoner. The southern part of the city was now mostly in German hands, though the Soviets still clung to parts of the riverbank.

Now the fighting shifted back to the center of the city. On 27 September, the Germans began another push against Mamayev Hill, and after a brutal fight managed to shove the defenders

down on the northeast slope of the hill. In the meantime, Paulus also began a drive into the factory district, losing many soldiers but pressing the Soviets very hard.

The fighting raged for two more days. The Germans had managed to take most of the central district of the city, giving them positions near the river from which they could fire parachute flares to spot boats trying to cross during the night, and then shoot them up. However, as in the south the defenders managed to cling on in pockets along the riverbank, as well as in isolated strongpoints in the rubble of the city. Some of these strongpoints would hold out to the end of the battle. Sergeant Jakob Pavlov and his men performed a stubborn defense of a building that would become known as "Pavlov's House". Pavlov, who would live out the war to become the famous master of a Russian Orthodox monastery, would be nicknamed the "Homeowner".

Some men cracked. There were many desertions to the Germans, though any Red Army soldier who seemed inclined to even consider the idea was liable to be shot without hesitation, as was anyone who failed to shoot down a comrade trying to get to enemy lines. Indeed, discipline was so harsh that it contributed to the exhaustion. Some soldiers returning from the hospital to the front lines found themselves tagged as deserters and facing execution, and one soldier who ran away from an entire company that deserted was arrested because he had not done more to stop the rest, even though his fellows shot at him when he left them. Even picking up a German propaganda leaflet to roll a cigarette could be a capital offense.

Soviet propaganda of course plastered over such unpleasanties, playing up the troops in the rubble as heroic fighters motivated by the glory of Great Leader Stalin. That was pure silliness, one of the men writing later: "In the trenches, the last thing we thought about was Stalin."

* In the meantime, the air battle raged over the city. The Luftwaffe still held the upper hand over the Red Air Force in the skies, but the Soviets were now contesting them bitterly for the right. Red squadrons were thrown into combat with little training or preparation. When they were annihilated, sometimes within a week, new ones took their place.

Some Red aviators learned their skills under fire. There were even squadrons of women fighter pilots, some of whom were very skilled. One, Lidia Litvyak, had ten kills to her credit before her death in the skies over the battleground. With such sacrifices, the Red Air Force began to obtain the upper hand in the air over Stalingrad. As they did so, they began to hinder the movements of German reconnaissance aircraft, preventing them from observing Red Army activities behind the front lines.

Red Army forces had attempted to drive on the Germans from the north of the city on 18 and 19 September, but the attacks were halted in their tracks by Luftwaffe airpower. For a moment, both sides were spent and made no attempts to break the stalemate, though the fighting continued at a thunderous rumble.

[8.5] THE STRUGGLE IN THE RUINS: OCTOBER 1942

* The exhausted lull in the fighting couldn't last. In hindsight, Hitler should have simply bottled up Stalingrad and left the place alone. His real business was to the south, and the battle for the city was no more than an increasingly expensive distraction. However, the struggle for Stalingrad had become a test of wills between the two dictators. Hitler was a person of obsessions, and Stalingrad had become one of them. Stalin gave it equal importance; it was not only a strategic location, the city bore his name, and its loss would be a personal humiliation. The thought of the Germans taking it away from him brought out all his deep reserves of stubbornness and ruthlessness. Stalin was also beginning to see that the game favored him. If the two dictators were alike in many ways, they were different in others: Hitler was the more impulsive, Stalin the more patient and calculating.

The Soviet nation was committed to the battle as well. Behind the lines, the defense of Stalingrad became a national cause, with citizens donating what valuables they had. Factories that had been relocated from the path of the German advance the winter before to raw industrial cities beyond the Urals were now beginning to churn out weapons in vast quantities. Women and adolescents tended the machines, backing up their male relations at the front.

The Red Army was making the Germans pay. Paulus found the price frightful. He had taken almost 40,000 casualties in the fight for city to that time. He was also aware that his position was far from secure. He was deep inside a salient in Soviet lines, with his flanks protected by Rumanian, Hungarian, and Italian troops of doubtful reliability. German generals had proposed that these foreign divisions be braced up by German officers and troops, but the Rumanian and Italian governments had refused it as an insult to their national sovereignty. Hitler, reluctant to offend his allies, did not press the matter, though he remained uneasy over the issue.

Paulus was showing signs of nervous strain. Chuikov, as tough as he was, was thoroughly stressed as well, having broken out in ghastly sores. He had lost at least twice as many men as the Germans, and despite the deadly risk thousands of Red Army troops had deserted, soldiers preferring to take the chance of being caught and shot to the certainty of being killed in the meat-grinder. Many deserters were not worried about threats of reprisals against relatives, since their families were trapped behind German lines and beyond Stalin's reach, at least for the moment. Deserters often dressed as women to try to slip through the net.

Chuikov was also worried because harsh winter weather was approaching. In itself, despite its discomforts winter was an ally of the Red Army, but the Volga was wide and it could take some time to freeze over. Ice floes on the river would crush boats trying to make the nighttime runs that kept the defenders resupplied and reinforced. Once the ice was solid and thick, supplies could be carried across, but until that time Chuikov and his men would be on their own.

* On 2 October Paulus began another push, this time from the north into the factory district, roughly from the line where Hube and the 16th Panzer Division had been halted in August. The assault began with an artillery barrage, supported by Luftwaffe bombing, that lasted into 4 October. The bombardment quickly hit oil tanks near the Red October factory that Chuikov had thought were empty. They weren't, exploding in a huge blast, with burning fuel pouring across the ruins and into the river.

German ground troops moved against the Red October factory on 4 October. The fighting there was as or more nasty than any experienced in the struggle for the city to that time. Soldiers on both sides went berserk, throwing themselves at the enemy with total disregard for their own safety and sometimes, much to their own astonishment, regaining their senses to find themselves alive and surrounded by the dead and dying.

Paulus began a heavy drive on the Tractor Factory on 14 October and managed to get a hold on it after two days of brutal fighting, though that wasn't the same thing as saying he had completely captured it: isolated pockets of Red Army troops fought on in the ruins of the factory, proving very hard and expensive to dislodge. He started another push against the Barricades and Red October factories on 19 October, and got a similarly painful hold on them with four days of equally brutal fighting. Soviet troops even set up strongpoints inside factory ovens and made the Germans pay.

The city was covered with smoke during the day, lit up by flames at night. One German officer reported seeing dogs fleeing the city in the darkness, desperately trying to swim across the Volga to escape the hell and thunder. By the end of October Paulus had bogged down once more, though Chuikov remained deeply concerned. The Germans were slowly pushing the Soviets back and the Volga was beginning its gradual freeze. Soon he would be cut off from supplies.

[8.6] THE STRUGGLE IN THE RUINS: NOVEMBER 1942

* The fighting for Stalingrad was going nowhere in any hurry, and so the Germans decided to modify their tactics. Hitler announced the change in plans at a public rally in Munich on 8 November 1942, saying that Stalingrad was all but conquered: "There are only a very few small places left there. Now the others say: 'Why don't you make faster progress?' Because I don't want to create a second Verdun but prefer to do the job with small shock troop units."

The "small shock troop units" were four battalions of "engineers", or what might actually be better called "pioneers", each with 600 men, specially trained for reducing fortifications. They arrived on 9 November and went into the hell at the Barricades plant in the dark hours of the morning of 10 November in one more push to clear the Red Army out of Stalingrad.

The madness of the fighting had now gone beyond battles over a factory, to murderous struggles over sections of a factory. The Soviets had set up strongpoints in the "Chemist's Shop" and what they called the "Red House". The Chemist's Shop fell quickly, but the battle for the Red House went on into the next day, 11 November. The defenders finally holed up in the cellar, where the German pioneers wiped them out with gasoline and satchel charges.

The Germans had won little for so much painful work. Soviet troops were still fighting hard in the rest of the factory and the pioneer battalions, now badly depleted, ended up going nowhere, doing no more than trying to survive an endless series of random, vicious clashes. Still, the Germans had pushed the Soviets back into pockets, and Paulus had cause to think that with a

little more effort, he might be able to exterminate the defenders completely and win this nightmarish battle.

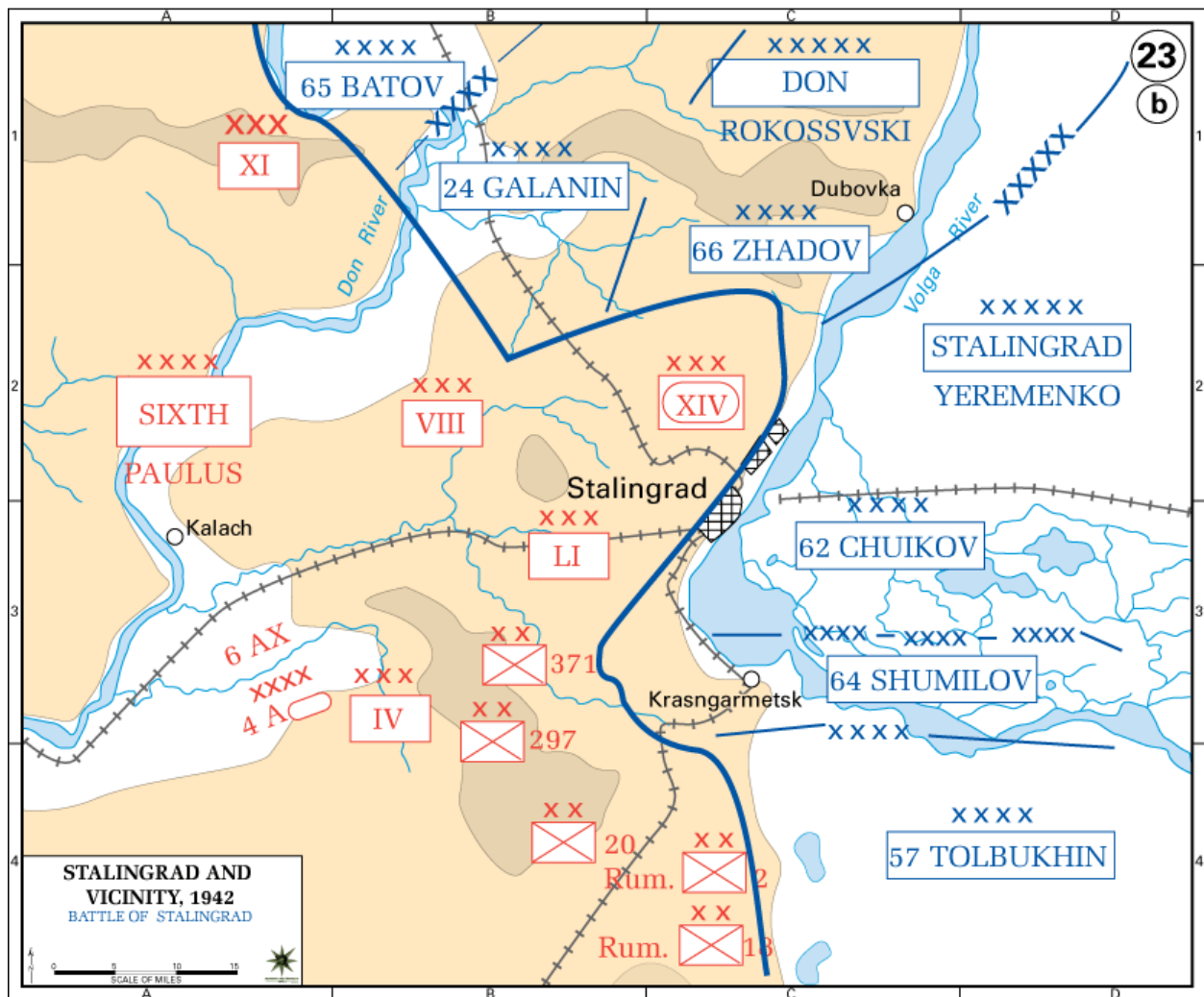
Chuikov was correspondingly desperate, since supplies, ammunition, and reinforcements were drying up. All he could give his men for rations was a supply of chocolate bars. Chuikov screamed up the chain of command for help and got useless answers. However, he was experienced enough with the Soviet system to suspect from the vague replies that there was something going on and people were trying to keep it a secret.

Chuikov had some pretty good ideas of what was up, and he finally got a real answer from superiors on the evening of 18 November 1942. Before dawn on 19 November, he had the satisfaction of hearing the distant thunder of a massive artillery barrage to the northwest of the city and knowing what was happening. The Red Army was taking the offensive.

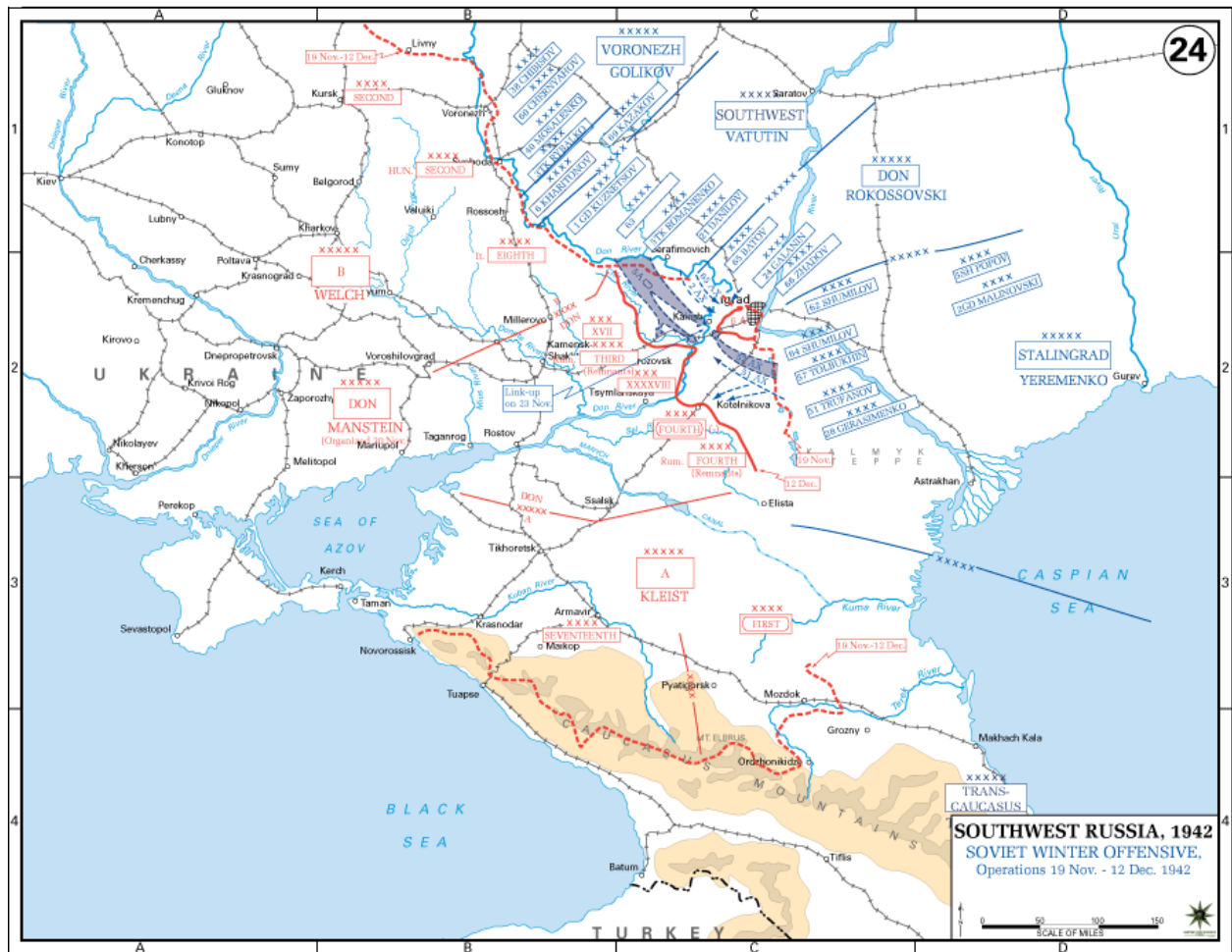
[9.0] The Battle For Stalingrad (2)

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* In early November 1942, the Germans seemed close to driving the Red Army out of Stalingrad, only to be surprised by a massive two-pronged Soviet counteroffensive, Operation URANUS, that trapped the German 6th Army in the city. Hitler refused to authorize a breakout; an attempt to relieve the 6th Army failed, and in February 1943 the Red Army stamped out all resistance in the city. To the south, the Germans performed a hasty withdrawal from their positions at the foothills of the Caucasus and managed to escape being trapped by the Soviet advance.



[9.1] COUNTERSTROKE: OPERATION URANUS



* Paulus was not completely surprised by the Soviet counteroffensive, or at least he shouldn't have been. He had been getting plenty of reports that the Red Army was secretly building up forces above his northern flank, one intelligence officer telling him on 27 October that they were confronted with "an attack army, armed to the teeth, and of considerable size."

Two days later, on 29 October, the commander of Rumanian forces in the area reported that Red Army units had been making continuous small attacks, clearly probing the strength of the defenses. Paulus acknowledged that there was a Soviet buildup in the area but downplayed its size and significance. It would prove a fatal misjudgement.

* Plans for the counteroffensive had begun way back in mid-September. On 12 September, Stalin had conducted a strategy session with his senior generals concerning the relief of Stalingrad. Zhukov was in attendance, and he and General Vasilevsky, Chief of the General Staff, muttered a few comments to each other about the possibilities of the situation. Stalin did not like people trying to keep secrets from him and challenged them.

They couldn't elaborate much on their comments, but Stalin was feeling open-minded and told them to consider different options, then report back to him at a meeting the next night. The two generals showed up at the appointed time on the night of 13 September. Stalin was feeling grumpy, complaining at length about the failure of the British to deliver satisfactory amounts of war material, but having vented his frustrations he then asked the two men: "Well, what did you come up with?"

Their plan was straightforward, if not necessarily easy to implement. The brute-force approach to relieving Stalingrad would be to send the Red Army into the city in force and push the Germans back. A more sensible plan, the two generals explained, would be to build up forces on the flanks of the German salient at Stalingrad and then launch an encirclement operation, with pincers driving south and west to meet at the critical bridgehead at Kalach. The German 6th Army would be trapped and wiped out.

Time would be needed to build up the forces. The counteroffensive would jump off in November, after the arrival of winter weather that would provide the Red Army with a tactical advantage. In addition, although Stalin had been thoroughly unhappy to find out that Operation TORCH, the Anglo-American invasion of North Africa, scheduled for November, had led his allies to suspend the Murmansk convoys following the current PQ 18 convoy due to demands on escort vessels.

Chuikov would be given only the minimal amount of men and material needed to allow him to hang on, keeping Hitler and the Wehrmacht fixated on Stalingrad. In fact, while Paulus would try to take Stalingrad with the equivalent of ten divisions during his attacks in September and October, Chuikov would only get five to defend the city. The Red Army was going to hold Stalingrad with one hand and use the other for a sucker punch.

Stalin liked the plan, telling the two generals: "No one except the three of us is to know about it." He approved the formal battle plan for Operation URANUS, as it was designated, on 28 September.

* The northern pincer was to be built up around Serafimovich, about 120 kilometers (75 miles) northwest of Kalach. The Don flowed almost due east there, with the town on the south bank of the river. Serafimovich had been defensible enough to keep it in Red Army hands during the German drive east over the past summer. The German line opposite Serafimovich was held by the Rumanian 3rd Army; the Rumanians were spread thin along their section of the line, and were poorly equipped and led anyway. Italian and Hungarian divisions held the line to the northwest. They were not in much better shape than the Rumanians and were unlikely to come to their aid.

The northern pincer would hinge on the southern suburbs of Stalingrad, along the Soviet defensive line on the west bank of the Volga to the south of the city. The target was elements of Hoth's 4th Panzer Army, and particularly the Rumanian 4th Army. The buildup was performed quietly, with troops and equipment sent forward in groups at night to help conceal the overall size of the effort. There's a story that when Zhukov saw a truck turn its lights on, he went up to it and shattered its headlights with a stick. True or not, Zhukov was a good planner and took a

personal interest in checking up on things himself, sometimes seeming to be everywhere and making sure that things were done as he ordered them done.

Everything was hidden and camouflaged during the day. Since it was impossible to completely conceal that there were Red Army forces in the area, considerable effort was spent to build fortifications to suggest a defensive posture. Red Army troops, who had traditionally tended to be unnerved by German armor, were put through exercises where they were required to remain in their trenches and let tanks roll over the top of them.

* Although Stalin had caused repeated disasters in the first year of the conflict by refusing to take realities into consideration, he had largely learned his lesson, and was willing to be patient with the extensive preparations; in fact, he worried that there weren't enough resources for a successful counter-offensive. On 13 November, Zhukov and Vasilevsky went to Moscow to brief Stalin and reassure him. Zhukov later wrote: "We could tell he was pleased, because he puffed unhurriedly on his pipe, stroked his mustache, and listened to us without interrupting."

Koba had good reason to purr. A million men were ready to move forward; they would be supported by 900 tanks, over 13,000 artillery pieces, and over 1,100 aircraft. Forces would not be committed in bits and pieces this time.

On the other side of the coin, enough intelligence about Soviet activities behind the lines was coming in to make Hitler nervous, and on 10 November he ordered a panzer division into the area as reinforcement. Weather and equipment breakdowns hobbled the movement, and only a portion of the panzer division made it there in time to meet the assault.

The word to go ahead was sent from Moscow: SEND A MESSENGER TO PICK UP FUR GLOVES. Soldiers of the Soviet Fifth Tank Army and Twenty-First Army, under Major General Nikolai Vatutin, readied themselves to go forward in the dark hours of 19 November, and then 3,500 guns and Katyusha rocket launchers punched through falling snow and thick ground fog to give the Rumanian 3rd Army a memorable predawn wakeup call. Although in the past such barrages had usually been conducted all up and down the line, this time they were focused on important breakthrough sectors. Red Army troops began a push at 8:50 AM, and were soon followed by hundreds of tanks.

The Rumanians actually held their ground for a few hours, but they were completely outmatched and soon broke and ran in panic. The weather helped keep the Luftwaffe grounded, though it cleared enough by mid-morning to allow swarms of VVS Shturmoviks to add their weight to the attack, and soon Vatutin's troops had torn a huge hole in the enemy line. Soviet troops poured through and moved rapidly southeast, with a stream of messages flowing out of Stalin's office prodding them on.

* The southern pincer, consisting of the Soviet Fifty-Seventh and Fifty-First Armies under the command of Major General Konstantin Rokossovsky and under the overall direction of Yeremenko, was to jump off the next morning, 20 November. The delay between the first and second assaults was intended to draw German reinforcements away from Yeremenko's lines.

Yeremenko had protested that the delay was too short, and been overruled. He still held back as long as he could on the morning of 20 November until orders came in to move out, period.

Yeremenko's guns and rocket launchers began their bombardment at 10:00 AM. He was pleasantly pleased to find that the Rumanian 4th Army quickly crumbled under his attack. The advance was hazardous, since obstructions, including gullies and ravines that could swallow up a tank, could be almost invisible in the white-on-white conditions. A number of tankmen suffered broken arms and the like from being slammed around inside their vehicles in unexpected collisions with obstacles. It was so foggy in places that tank commanders had to try to steer by compass, but the Red Army was on a roll. The troops were cheerful, excited, and willing to put up with hardships. Wounded stuck in hospitals wrote home that they were upset that they were missing out on it -- though it should be remembered that they knew their mail was being read by security personnel.

The Germans, suffering from complacency plus command confusions caused by Hitler's attempts to control the front by remote control, were slow to react. The initial assumption was that these attacks were just more Soviet probes that would be quickly turned back. The scale of the attack and its objectives didn't start to become apparent until the morning of 21 November. If Paulus had been perceptive and prompt, he might have been able to defeat the Soviet encirclement operation by parts, focusing his armor on the southern pincer first and then turning on the northern pincer.

It didn't happen. The southern pincer counteroffensive moved rapidly northwest toward the bridge at Kalach, but the northern pincer reached the bridge first and captured it intact. Lieutenant Colonel Grigor Filippov used two captured German tanks to drive up to the bridge and then open fire on the guards, with T-34s following them up discreetly. The Germans knocked out two tanks that were still trying to cross the bridge, but Filippov radioed for help. His comrades weren't far away and arrived quickly, overwhelming the guards and securing the bridge.

The next day, 23 November, forward elements of the northern and southern pincers met each other about 48 kilometers (30 miles) southeast of Kalach, firing off green signal flares to identify themselves, as well as celebrate a bit. Although the encirclement was now complete, the Germans were not inclined to sit idly by while they were cut off, and there was fierce fighting to consolidate the ring around Stalingrad. It was done by the end of the day. The Red Army had lost over 100,000 men in the operation, but inflicted about 95,000 casualties on the enemy and taken 72,000 prisoners.

[9.2] OPERATION WINTER STORM

* With the completion of the encirclement around Stalingrad, the Red Army had trapped about 300,000 enemy troops in Stalingrad. Paulus's complacency had vaporized. On 20 November, Paulus had radioed Berlin with a proposal for his forces to fall back to a defensive position. Hitler denied the request. On 22 November, Paulus asked for "freedom of action", requesting the

right to break out of encirclement if the situation became dangerous enough. The word came down from the Fuehrer: REQUEST DENIED. On 23 November, when the situation was clearly becoming desperate, Paulus pleaded with Berlin for permission to pull out. A third time the answer came back: REQUEST DENIED. Paulus was informed that he would be kept resupplied by air.

Senior Luftwaffe officers were dumbfounded at the idea. The success of the airlift that had sustained the Demyansk pocket the winter before had suggested the same trick would work twice, but the German forces in the Demyansk pocket had been much smaller. The Luftwaffe didn't have the airlift capacity to keep 6th Army resupplied at the best of times, and the weather in the Stalingrad area was nasty even by Russian standards. However, in a meeting on 24 November, Reichsmarshal Goering assured Hitler that his Luftwaffe could do the job.

OKH had a new chief of staff, General Kurt Zeitzler, a hyperactive and round-built fellow nicknamed "General Lightning Ball" who had replaced Halder in September 1942. Zeitzler had been encouraging the Fuehrer to approve a breakout. Zeitzler angrily protested Goering's proposal, detailing the large quantities of material that would need to be delivered just to keep 6th Army minimally supplied. Goering replied: "I can manage that."

Zeitzler was infuriated, firing back: "It's a lie!" It was, Goering's own staff having told him it was impossible. It made no difference. Hitler sided with Goering and the airlift went forward. Zeitzler was absolutely correct. Even on the best days, the Luftwaffe could only provide a fifth of the required tonnage. Worse, the Luftwaffe and the Army suffered from interservice rivalries, and the Luftwaffe refused to coordinate shipments of materials with Army quartermasters. Such supplies as were provided were often botched, with airlifts of such famously ridiculous items as large quantities of contraceptives, right shoes, and Christmas trees.

* Hitler did take more positive actions to deal with the crisis. On 20 November, he had created Army Group Don, under the command of Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, which consisted of the encircled 6th Army; what was left of the Rumanian 3rd and 4th Armies; and most of Hoth's 4th Panzer army, which had been mostly deployed outside the Soviet encirclement. Due to the poor weather, Manstein had to take the train to his new assignment. He stopped to meet with Field Marshall von Kluge of Army Group Center, who warned him: "You will find it impossible to move any formation larger than a battalion without first referring back to the Fuehrer."

Manstein had no particular intention of giving much more weight to what the Fuehrer said than absolutely required. Manstein had sympathies with Naziism, supporting the harsh treatment of Jews in the occupied territories even though he had some Jewish ancestry himself, but he was no great admirer of the top Nazis. In fact, Manstein had trained his pet dachshund to raise a paw when told: "Heil Hitler!"

More to the point, Hitler was back in Berlin while Manstein was on the front, with a battle to fight and an army to rescue. Manstein devised a plan for a breakout. He would perform a diversion towards Kalach, and then a corps of Hoth's 4th Panzer would drive northeast to punch a hole through the Soviet ring around Stalingrad. That done, Paulus would be sent a simple

message -- "DONNERSCHLAG (THUNDERCLAP)" -- as the signal to Paulus to lead the 6th Army through the hole out of its trap.

* The diversion towards Kalach was spearheaded by the 11th Panzer Division under Major General Hermann Balck. Balck was a competent, energetic, and imaginative commander, and when his panzers ran into two Soviet tank brigades near State Farm #79 on 7 December, he conducted a brilliant two-day battle of deception and maneuver that all but wiped the Red armor out, along with their supply train. However, the Red Army was in the area in force and Balck soon found himself in a slugging match, forced to fight a battle of attrition that favored the Soviets. By nightfall on 9 December, the Red Army had destroyed half of 11th Panzer.

Still, the Soviets were distracted as planned. At dawn on 12 December, Hoth's push to relieve Stalingrad, codenamed Operation WINTER STORM, jumped off, led by the 6th Panzer Division, which had just been brought from France by train. For the first two days, the advance went well, though it was not a stroll in the park by any means. There was some resistance in the form of hit-and-run attacks by small groups of Soviet infantry by day and cavalry by night, with the attackers making use of the network of ravines that crisscrossed the landscape for concealment. The ravines also made the going difficult for German tanks.

There were two tributaries of the Don, the Aksai and the Mishkova, flowing roughly to the west that blocked the path of the drive. 6th Panzer reached the Aksai during 13 December and paused to allow the supply train to catch up. Having resupplied, the tankmen moved out towards the Mishkova -- and soon found themselves in a nasty fight with large numbers of Soviet tanks. Superior German skill and training prevailed and the Red Army was forced to fall back, but the Soviets remained in the area in force and continued to contest 6th Panzer's advance. The Germans didn't reach the Mishkova until 19 December. On the morning of 20 December Hoth reported to Manstein that 4th Panzer was prepared to begin one last push whenever Paulus felt ready to perform a breakout.

* By this time, Manstein was trying to deal with an unpleasant complication to his plans. The Red Army had obtained such excellent results with the attack on the Rumanian 3rd Army along the Don that the Kremlin decided to give the 225,000 troops of the Italian 8th Army, further upstream along the Don, the same treatment. The plan was codenamed Operation SATURN.

The Italians were a soft target -- poorly trained, equipped, led, and motivated. Three full Soviet armies fell on them early on 16 December 1942 and sent them running to the rear in terror. In two weeks of fighting, the Red Army would drive deep through Axis lines and take about 60,000 Italians prisoner, only a fraction of whom would survive captivity. About half the Italians managed to escape, but the Italian 8th Army had ceased to exist. The Italians were mostly conscripts who had no enthusiasm for the Axis cause. When a whole battalion of Italian troops surrendered to the Red Army without offering any resistance, Soviet interrogators asked an Italian sergeant why they hadn't put up a fight. He replied, sensibly: "We didn't fire back because we thought it would be a mistake."

The Italians deserted in mass, some of them walking hundreds of kilometers west until they could jump on trains to carry them out of the war. The Germans, who had never regarded them

as much of an asset in the first place, decided it would be more trouble than it would be worth to force them to fight, and charitably let them go. Many of the Italians died of exposure and starvation. Some Ukrainian peasants took pity on them and took them in. Ukrainian peasants could somehow see Italian peasant boys in such desperate circumstances as not so different from their own sons. The collapse of the Italian Army in the East was yet another bitter tragedy flowing from Mussolini's foolish delusions of military glory, and another blow that would lead to his fall in the coming summer.

In the here and now, however, Manstein had a very difficult situation to deal with, trying to rescue the 6th Army in Stalingrad with one hand and deal with the crisis on his northern flank with the other. He had done about as much as he could do to help Paulus. Now Paulus had to make up his mind about what he would do to help himself.

The Soviets were jamming communications and it wasn't a secure way to communicate anyway, so on 19 December, as Hoth's panzers were approaching the Mishkova, Manstein sent one of his staff officers to Stalingrad in a Fiesler Storch lightplane to confer with Paulus. Manstein was reluctant to flatly tell Paulus to organize a breakout and so the officer's instructions to Paulus were indirect. Not surprisingly, Paulus waffled. Hitler had not authorized a breakout attempt, the logistical and tactical issues were difficult, and his chief of staff, Brigadier General Arthur Schmidt, stubbornly insisted that if the supply situation were improved, 6th Army could hold out until spring, when the tables could be turned back on the Soviets.

Paulus decided against a breakout. Manstein had been willing to disobey Hitler when he could, but though he could have ordered Paulus to conduct the breakout, he did not want to go that far. Manstein was a realist. If he added two and two he would get four, whether that was the answer he wanted or not. On 23 December, he order Hoth to withdraw, effectively writing off Paulus and the 6th Army.

[9.3] PAULUS SURRENDERS

* The German troops surrounded in Stalingrad spent a miserable Christmas, frostbitten and starving. The impractical airlift had clearly failed, and as the Red Army tightened their grip on the city, fewer and fewer transports made it in. A visitor who visited Hermann Goering's office in late December was shocked to find the Reichsmarshal sobbing uncontrollably at his desk.

The surrounded German soldiers fought on, even though they had little chance of survival. They piled up the frozen bodies of their dead comrades for cover. The fighting dragged on through New Year's Day, into January. Their Soviet adversaries, in contrast, were happy with things. Although the weather was bitterly cold, that meant that the Volga had frozen over solidly, and plenty of food and supplies were coming across. The Germans had to conserve ammunition and were not able to seriously interfere with the supply runs.

Red Army troops were getting hot food and hot tea, and they were marched across the Volga to clean up and delouse in sweaty steam baths. Chuikov had got himself into trouble while making

such a journey across the river on foot on mid-December to attend a party, stumbling back sloppy drunk to fall through thin ice into the river. He was promptly fished out, no doubt having sobered up in a hurry. Back on the fighting lines, Red Army soldiers liked to bait the miserable Germans, with Soviet night patrols setting up dummies dressed to look like Hitler with signs suggesting that German troops take a shot. The dummies were mined in case some hardcore Nazi took offense and decided to have them removed. Leaflet drops were performed on the Germans to encourage them to surrender, with the leaflets written by German Communists working for the Red propaganda machine.

Stalin was reverting somewhat to his old style of impatience and pushing his commanders to wipe out the Germans in Stalingrad, but there was good cause to hurry. The Germans trapped in the city were tying down seven Soviet armies that could be used elsewhere, most particularly against Army Group A in the Caucasus. The Soviets needed to eliminate the 6th Army as quickly as possible. In early January, the Germans in the city observed that the Red Army was building up concentrations of men, armor, and particularly artillery outside the outskirts of the city, in preparation for a final push. The plan was codenamed Operation RING, and Rokossovsky would be in command. Zhukov had suggested to Stalin that Yeremenko might better deserve the honor, but Koba answered sarcastically: "We are not high-school girls!"

Chuikov's troops were to take part in the offensive, tying up the Germans by exerting pressure on them from the east. Rokossovsky paid a visit to Chuikov in his bunker and asked him if his troops were up to moving against the Germans to keep them pinned down. One of Chuikov's aides couldn't restrain himself and burst out: "If in the summer and autumn all Paulus' forces were unable to drive us into the Volga, then the hungry and frozen Germans won't even move six steps eastward!"

On 8 January, Rokossovsky sent a messenger under a white flag through German lines with a letter outlining surrender terms. The letter made its way to Paulus, who turned it down flat, refused to reveal its contents, and passed out orders to his men ordering them not to discuss surrender terms with Red Army representatives. On the next day, 9 January, the Soviets dropped leaflets on the 6th Army giving terms of surrender, but Paulus wouldn't budge. The Fuehrer had made it clear that surrender was not an option, and there was the issue of Army Group A, still stuck out on a limb in the south. Paulus had to stall for time.

The final push to retake Stalingrad began on the morning of 10 January 1943 with a tremendous barrage of 7,000 artillery pieces and Katyusha launchers. The wretched Germans fought back as well as they could, and it was a week before the Soviets cracked the outer ring of defenses. The survivors fell back into the city proper to conduct a last stand.

Manstein begged Hitler to allow Paulus to surrender, but the Fuehrer refused to consider the idea, instead coming up with wild and completely impractical schemes for rescuing the situation. As January ground on towards its end, the Red Army rooted out the German defenders, building by building. Germans soldiers began to surrender. Some officers committed suicide; others performed reckless attacks on the Soviets and died fighting -- which was just as well, since the Soviets were sometimes inclined to shoot German prisoners anyway. A substantial number of

Hiwis -- Soviet citizens in German uniforms -- were captured by Red troops, to be shown very little mercy.

On 30 January, Paulus was informed that he had been promoted to field marshal by the Fuehrer. This was not so much as a honor as to encourage him to commit suicide rather than surrender. Paulus considered suicide a breach of military discipline and against his religious principles; he not only wouldn't consider it himself, he had issued orders forbidding his troops from doing it as well, or even standing up to let the enemy shoot them. The next morning, 31 January, after sending a final radio message, he personally surrendered to Soviet troops who were just outside his command bunker. When Hitler got the news, he just stared silently. The next day he was raving with anger.

Paulus didn't give the order to 6th Army to surrender, but his troops no longer had much fight left in them. Resistance faded out over the next two days, with the last die-hards finally calling it quits. One Red Army colonel shouted at a group of prisoners, waving at the ruins all around them: "That's how Berlin is going to look!"

The ruins of the city fell quiet. Civilians -- astonishingly, roughly ten thousand had survived through the entire battle -- began to emerge from the rubble. On 2 February, a Luftwaffe Heinkel He-111 bomber made a flight over Stalingrad in order to drop supplies to survivors, if they could be found. After searching for a time, the radio operator told the pilot: "Nothing anywhere." The bomber flew back to its home base.

* The battle of Stalingrad was over. The Russian-born correspondent Alexander Werth of the LONDON SUNDAY TIMES documented the ghastly scenery of the city after the shooting had stopped: "Trenches ran through the factory yards and through the workshops themselves. And now at the bottom of the trenches there still lay frozen green Germans and frozen gray Russians and frozen fragments of human shapes; and there were helmets, Russian and German, lying among the brick debris, and now half-filled with snow."

Roughly 100,000 German troops went into captivity. The catch included 22 generals, who were given good food and comfortable quarters. Alexander Werth got to interview them after the battle, finding them all clearly far better fed than their troops, though Werth noted that Paulus "looked pale and sick, with a nervous twitch in his left cheek." The embittered Paulus would eventually perform propaganda broadcasts for the Soviets. As far as his men went, they weren't as valuable as prizes and were treated accordingly. Only about 5,000 would ever return from Soviet prison camps.

Stalingrad was the German high tide in the East. 20 German divisions had been effectively destroyed, 6th Army had been completely wiped out, and six months' German war production had been lost. The armies of Italy, Hungary, and Rumania had suffered major blows. Both sides had lost very roughly 750,000 men each. To the Germans, it was a disaster, though Hitler blamed it all on the failings of his weakling allies. Heinz Guderian visited the Fuehrer in the aftermath and found him lacking his customary energy: "His left hand trembled, his back was bent, his gaze was fixed, his eyes protruded but lacked their former luster, his cheeks were flecked with red."

Goebbels' propaganda machine played up the German troops who had fallen in the battle as martyrs to the Nazi cause, and declared that Germany was now committed to "Total War", a total mobilization to obtain final victory in the face of adversity. Hitler still thought he could win through sheer power of will, telling Luftwaffe Field Marshal Erhard Milch: "We will end the war this year. I have accordingly decided on a gigantic mobilization of all German popular strength."

For the Soviets, the losses that they had suffered did not obscure the all-important fact that they had won. One soldier wrote his wife: "I'm in an exceptional mood. If you only knew, you'd be just as happy as I am. Imagine it -- the Fritzes are running away from us!"

Rebuilding the city began immediately. Red Army sappers had to clear mines and dud munitions, starting by establishing marked "safe routes" to allow workers to get from one place to another. Soon there would be 200,000 workers set up in tent cities. The first thing they did was bury the dead, then salvaged what could be salvaged and put things back together. By mid-March, the phones were working again, and by mid-June the Tractor Factory was back in operation, rolling out refurbished tanks that had been damaged in combat. Construction workers would continue to find remains of the dead in Stalingrad for years. One tale has it that well after the war, the raggedy skeletons of a German and a Soviet soldier were uncovered. Each had stuck his bayonet into the other and then both had been covered by rubble from a shell blast.

[9.4] STALINGRAD: THE AFTERMATH

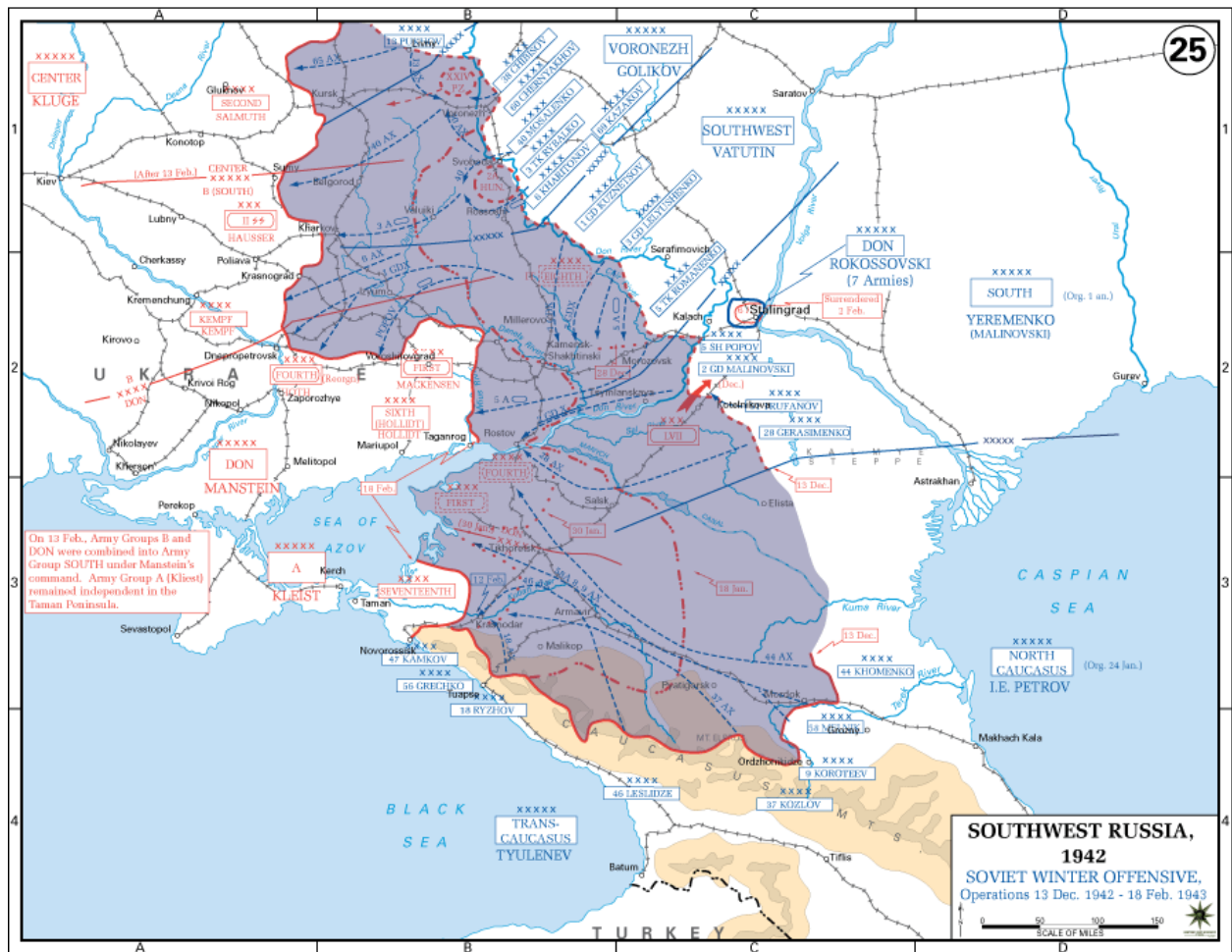
* The final surrender at Stalingrad did not put a stop to the fighting in the region. The Germans were off-balance and had to be pressed. Most importantly, German Army Group A was way out on a limb in the Caucasus, and if the Red Army moved fast they could cut off the Germans and bag the lot of them, just as they had bagged 6th Army at Stalingrad.

Alexander Werth observed Red soldiers on the move through the dark and frost, the path lit by a string of bonfires along the road:

BEGIN QUOTE:

Such was the endless procession coming out of Stalingrad; lorries, and horse sleighs and guns, and covered wagons, and even camels pulling sleighs -- several of them stepping sedately through the deep snow as if it were sand. Every conceivable means of transport was being used. Thousands of soldiers were marching, or rather walking in large irregular crowds, to the west, through this cold deadly night. But they were cheerful and strangely happy, and they kept shouting about Stalingrad and the job they had done.

END QUOTE



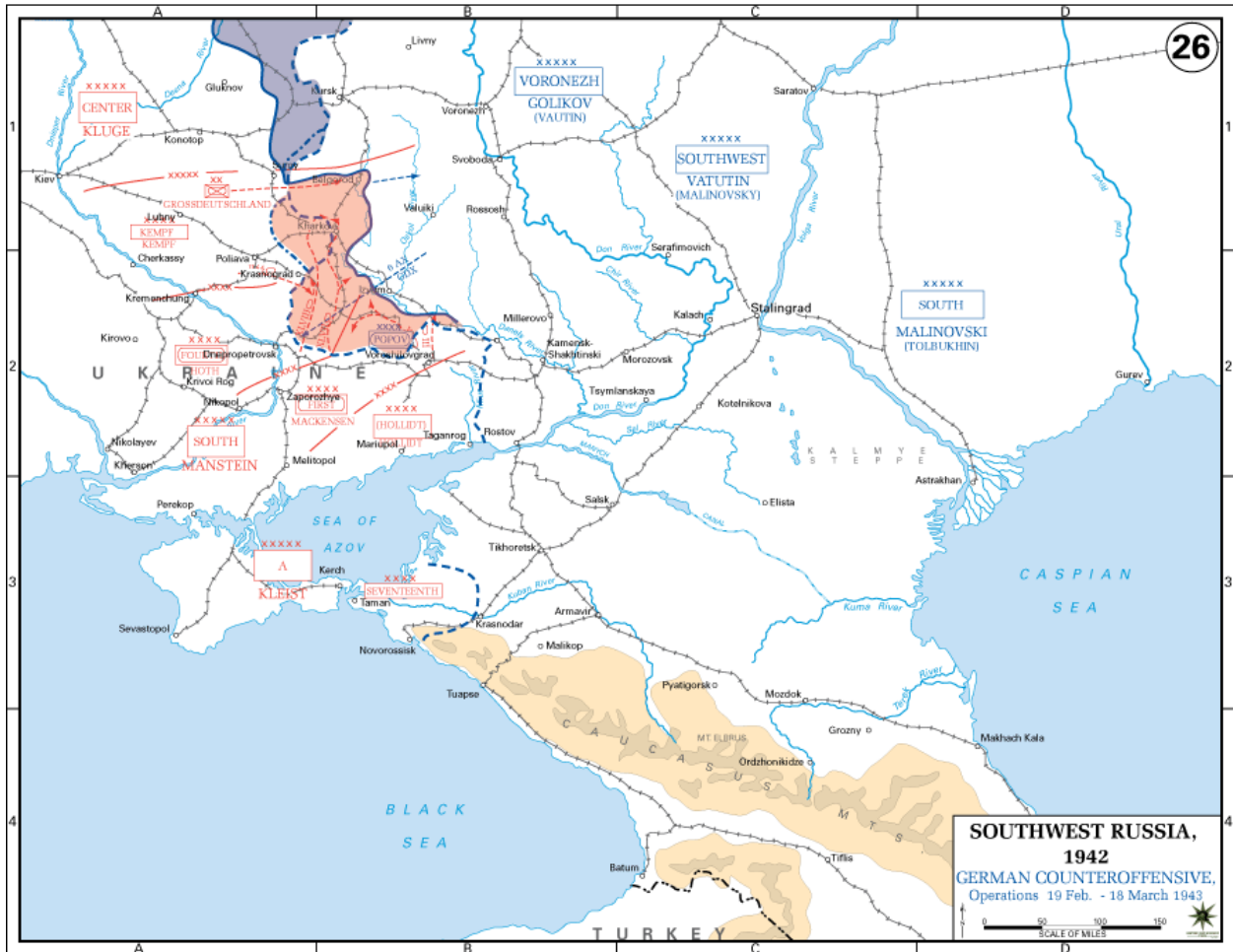
Army Group A's Kleist was perfectly aware that his head was in a noose that was going to cinch lethally tight around his neck at any moment. The Red Army was ten times closer to Rostov, his escape hatch out of the region, than he was. He wanted to withdraw immediately, but the order came back from Hitler: Stand your ground.

Kleist knew it was a death sentence, but Hitler quickly came around to the realization that any course of action other than withdrawal was completely mad. The next day Kleist received orders to pull out and bring everything he could carry with him. He didn't need to be told twice. When the Red Army reconquered Rostov (again!) on 14 February 1943, Army Group A was already out of their reach. Hitler was so relieved that he made Kleist a field marshal, in essence rewarding him for conducting a retreat. Obviously, circumstances were now looking much different to the Fuehrer than they had a year or two earlier.

By this time, the Soviet drive west was bogging down as troops outran their supply lines and German resistance solidified. In any case, the German excursion into the Caucasus was over, and they wouldn't be back there again. It was the German high-tide mark in the East.

* In the meantime, the Red Army had launched yet another offensive on the northern flank of the Axis lines, retaking the town of Kursk on 8 February and then grabbing Kharkov back from the

Germans on 16 February. The city had been depopulated by the war, reduced from its prewar population of 900,000 to about 300,000. Large numbers of its citizens had fled, tens of thousands had died of deprivation or been murdered by the Germans, and about 120,000 young people had been carted off to Germany in slavery.



The recapture of Kharkov was another bright moment for the Red Army, but the celebration was short-lived. Within days, the Germans performed a counterattack of their own, Manstein's Army Group South (as Army Group B had become in the meantime) driving back on Kharkov. The assault was spearheaded by the 2nd SS Panzer Corps, consisting of the "Das Reich", "Leibstandarte (Bodyguard) Adolf Hitler", and "Totenkopf (Death's Head)" divisions under the command of Lieutenant General Paul Hausser.

Hausser had lost an eye and a chunk of his jaw during the fighting in the USSR in 1941, giving him something of the appearance of an old chewed-up alley cat. He was just as combative, and his men were all dedicated SS troops, an elite, totally dedicated to Nazism and Adolf Hitler. The Fuehrer was not happy with Hausser at the moment, since the general had been ordered to stand and fight to the last man in Kharkov. Hausser didn't see the point of it and broke out on his own initiative. The 2nd SS was still on the run when Papa Hoth, Hausser's commander, ordered the counterattack on 19 February. Hausser, now able to fight a battle of maneuver, turned on the

Soviet Sixth Army, and with the help of the 48th Panzer Corps gave the overextended Soviets a brutal beating, inflicting tens of thousands of casualties and destroying hundreds of Red tanks for minimal losses of his own.

Hausser's panzers arrived at the outskirts of Kharkov on 9 March. He had been ordered to simply surround the city, but was allowed to make a "reconnaissance" into it if he thought it best. Taking a liberal interpretation of the meaning of "reconnaissance", he sent the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler division into the center of the town while the Das Reich and Totenkopf divisions performed the encirclement, joining hands on 15 March. By this time, Soviet troops in the city had been almost completely crushed. The SS troops were merciless, charging into a hospital to shoot the wounded in their beds, then torching the building.

The Red Army had proven at Stalingrad that they could beat the Germans; at Kharkov the Germans had proven that they should not be underestimated. The Soviets took the hint, and in fact it was the last major defeat they would ever suffer at German hands.

* Fighting lingered on for the moment in the Kuban region around the Taman Peninsula, the eastern gate to the Sea of Azov across from the Kerch Peninsula on the Crimea. Red Army forces had landed on the Taman in early February to pose a threat to the German rear, but the Germans had kept them bottled up, and in mid-April they launched a massive counterattack to push the Soviets back into the sea. The Germans were halted and the Red Army performed a counter-counteroffensive that didn't do much better. The fighting finally fizzled out in early May.

The ground force action in the Kuban was inconclusive, but it was a major Soviet victory in another respect: the Red Air Force finally achieved air superiority over the Germans on a level playing field. Soviet pilots flying Yak-1s, the Bell P-39, and other fighters managed to take the measure of German pilots in their Messerschmitts, with a dozen or more VVS pilots claiming ten or more kills of German aircraft. A Ukrainian pilot, Lieutenant Dmitri Glinka, was the star of the show, claiming 21 kills, while Alexander Pokryshkin, who had been a leader in trying to encourage the VVS to adopt more modern fighter tactics, scored 20.

Both flew P-39s, a type that was not generally liked back in America because it had poor high-altitude performance and some handling problems. It was, however, sturdy and heavily armed, and in the hands of a Red pilot that knew how to use it, dangerous to the enemy at low altitudes. VVS pilots liked it greatly, calling it the "Little Shaver". Soviet aircraft were undergoing an evolution at the time as well, with the good Yakovlev Yak-1 being developed into the better Yak-3 and the "heavy" Yak-9, and the despicable LaGG-3 "flying coffin" undergoing a makeover with a new, more powerful engine to become the formidable Lavochkin La-5, which would lead to the improved La-7.

The Germans would no more prove to be a pushover in the air than they were on the ground, but the days when the Luftwaffe regarded fighting the Red Air Force as "infanticide" were over, and as Soviet aircraft improved in quantity and quality the balance would tip steadily against the Germans in the air.

[9.5] SOVIETS RESURGENT

* The thaw in early spring had brought most ground combat operations to a halt until the ground dried out. Both sides spent several months reorganizing, resupplying, and preparing for the next round.

Stalin was in fine form, having himself declared "Marshal of the Soviet Union". Soviet propaganda played up all the successes of the war as due to the genius of the Great Leader, even recasting the disasters of 1941 as part of a brilliant master plan. He wasn't the only one feeling good about things, however. The morale of the officers and troops of the Red Army had grown by leaps and bounds. They felt like winners now, not losers.

Although in revolutionary days distinctions of rank and military protocol had been suppressed, they were now back in full force. Troops now had to salute officers, and the officers had to conduct themselves according to their station. While Red Army officers had not traditionally worn shoulder boards -- during the Revolution, some officers captured by bloodthirsty mobs had their shoulder boards nailed on -- they were restored by decree, much to the shock of some of the enlisted, the old sergeants griping: "They'll bring back the Tsar next!"

A Red Army officer wrote his wife: "Nina, don't worry about our uniforms. We dress better these days than any commander from the capitalist countries." The British got another pushy Soviet demand for supplies: over 27,000 meters (30,000 yards) of silver and gold braid.

* The Red Army was still not a particularly crisp organization. The troops tended to get drunk whenever they could, and not without good reason. As one Soviet soldier wrote in a letter home later in the war: "It is nearly impossible not to be drinking. What I am going through is indescribable; when I am drunk, everything is easier."

Drunkenness led to other problems. Brawls were not rare and murders were not unknown. There was also considerable pilferage and black-marketeering of supplies all up and down the ranks. Worse, although Red Army soldiers were often greeted warmly by peasants in areas they liberated, the welcome went sour when the soldiers robbed them of everything they could get their hands on.

On the other hand, the soldiers were willing to fight hard and they could be benign; companies would sometimes adopt orphan children as mascots, putting them to work on various small chores. Some of the youngsters had fought as partisans and were not strangers to violence. When a 15-year-old mascot was handed a German prisoner to escort to a holding pen, the boy immediately gunned him down. The Germans had murdered his family, and as far as the lad was concerned, the only good German was a dead German.

The state was calling on the energies of youths in more formal ways. Boys as young as 8 or 9 were enrolled in military schools such as the Alexander Suvorov Academy, where they were drilled and indoctrinated. To be sure, where the Germans had gone they had left hordes of orphans behind, and the Soviet state had to care for them somehow -- but as long as they had to be cared for, they would also serve the Motherland as future officers of the Red Army. Teenagers

were called into the ranks as drafts came by more and more often, pulling in younger men each time.

Women were pulled into home defense units, staffing anti-aircraft batteries, learning the dangerous trade of disarming bombs, and serving in fire fighting and rescue squads. At the front, they served in frontline medical units, operated radios, drove trucks, and tended aircraft, which they sometimes flew in combat. They were not generally front-line fighters, but they would fight when the occasion demanded it. Many had lost family members to the Germans and were after revenge.

As mentioned, there were all-woman aviation units. Soviet women aviators became particularly famous as the "die Nachthexen (Night Witches)", as the Germans called them. The Night Witches flew sorties over German lines in the dark at low level in antique Polikarpov U-2 (later Po-2) biplanes, called "Sewing Machines", idling the engine to glide in silently on any group of Germans foolish enough to light a fire in the open and then plastering them with machine-gun fire and small bombs. The practice of using the low-and-slow biplane for night attacks had begun in the early phases of the conflict in the East, when the Luftwaffe had absolute air superiority and such tactics were the only useful way to strike back from the air. It turned out to work well and the Soviets became enthusiastic about it.

Of course males flew the Po-2 as well, but it was the "Witches" who established its legend. The Germans, with a certain grudging admiration, made up stories about how a Po-2 would fly into the window of a house, shoot it up, and then fly back out again. The intruders rarely caused major damage but they were an insufferable nuisance, the Germans calling the Po-2 the "Duty Sergeant" because of its nighttime "bedchecks" on them.

The Germans took to moving around searchlight-equipped flak batteries, called "flak circuses", to areas where the Po-2s might be judged likely to show up, setting up the guns in the dark in hopes of surprising the intruders. It was clearly a major expenditure of effort to deal with a relatively petty nuisance. Po-2 pilots countered by flying their machines in pairs, one acting as noisy and troublesome as possible at range to draw fire, and then dodge away while the other hit the target. Incidentally, the little machine could land on almost any piece of level and solid ground and was also enthusiastically used in different versions as a transport, air ambulance, and courier aircraft. The Soviets would manufacture about 40,000 of them, making it one of the most heavily produced aircraft in history.

However, although Soviet propaganda made much of the liberation of their women, as with so much else in the USSR there was less to it than met the eye. Women rarely, if ever, attained positions of authority, and at worst they were implicitly or even blatantly treated as something like beasts of burden. The more attractive women soldiers could end up being officer's aides, serving their superiors at attention during the day and on their backs at night as "campaign wives". To be sure, such arrangements existed to an extent in other armies, but Stalin had specifically approved the practice. Rumors made such a scandal of women in uniform that some families were as embarrassed when a daughter enlisted as if she had gone to work in a whorehouse. When female veterans wore medals, muttered remarks would go around to suggest they had won them on their backs.

Although there was great enthusiasm for the struggle among the Soviet people, the fighters in the front lines, the "frontoviki", still had to be reminded that they faced unpleasant consequences if their enthusiasm faltered. In April 1943, the NKVD Special Departments in the Red Army were reorganized as SMERSH, from "Smert Shpionam (Death to Spies)", under Beria's henchman Viktor Abakumov. Soldiers never much cared for their NKVD watchdogs, who were pale because they worked mostly at night and looked at soldiers as if they were all potential traitors, and the name SMERSH would become hated and dreaded.

[10.0] Operation Citadel

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* Stalingrad had been a major disaster for the Reich, but the Wehrmacht still remained a powerful opponent. In the spring of 1943 Hitler initiated a plan for an offensive, codenamed Operation CITADEL, to choke off a Soviet salient in German lines around the town of Kursk. Red intelligence learned of the plan, setting the stage for the greatest armor battle of World War II, a clash that would set Germany on a course of irreversible decline in the East.

[10.1] THE ALLIES GAIN THE INITIATIVE / UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

* The Soviet Union had not merely survived the German onslaught of 1942, it had crushed it. The Axis tide seemed to be going back out on all fronts:

- At the end of October and the beginning of November 1942, the British had defeated the Axis drive into Egypt at El Alamein. It was a much smaller battle than that of Stalingrad, but it guaranteed the security of the Middle East and its strategic significance was undeniable.
- Even as the British were mopping up after their victory, the TORCH landings in North Africa went forward, with the British and Americans managing to make a deal with authorities in French North Africa to bring most of France's colonies there into the Allied fold. The Germans had managed to throw forces into Tunisia, however, resulting in a protracted fight.
- While the Soviets were carefully staying out of the war with Japan, its progress was of course indirectly relevant to the USSR. In early June 1942, the Americans had handed the Japanese a stinging naval defeat at Midway Island in the Central Pacific, and from August the Americans had been engaged in seesaw battles with the Japanese in the South Pacific at the island of Guadalcanal, fighting a grinding war of attrition that was gradually tilting towards the Americans.

The Murmansk convoys had been resumed in December; they would continue to be somewhat intermittent, but Lend-Lease aid from the Americans was now approaching its full flood, with the Siberian and Persian connections helping to funnel war materiel to the Soviets.

* In January 1943, Churchill and Roosevelt met in Casablanca, Morocco. On 24 January, in the aftermath of the meeting, the two leaders reaffirmed their commitment to ensure that Lend-Lease supplies were being delivered as promised to the Soviets; they also committed to a "Combined Bomber Offensive" to pound the Reich day and night. The most ringing element in the Casablanca delegation read as follows: "The elimination of German, Japanese, and Italian war power means the unconditional surrender of Germany, Italy, and Japan."

The "unconditional surrender" doctrine has been the focus of intense debate ever since. Superficially it came across as an inflexible declaration of Allied strength and resolve, but it was driven by many considerations, one of the biggest being the need to reassure the Soviets. The deal the Americans had struck with local French authorities in the invasion of North Africa had not gone over well in the Kremlin -- or for that matter, with Roosevelt's critics back home in the USA. To be sure, the deal had no particular bearing on the war in the East, but it suggested to Stalin that his allies might demonstrate a similar flexibility in the future at the expense of the USSR. Put another way, "unconditional surrender" actually translated to: *No under-the-table deals with the enemy.*

The critics of the unconditional surrender doctrine would later claim it prolonged the war and the bloodshed, but in hindsight it is difficult to prove that case, since both Germany and Japan demonstrated a clear determination to fight to the last. Of course, in the face of the demand for unconditional surrender, the regimes in charge were compelled to keep on fighting, since defeat meant their elimination -- but the alternative for the Allies was to consider letting these regimes survive. If the militarists were allowed to stay in charge, that made the odds fairly good of having to fight them again a generation down the road. Over the shorter term, if the Allies suggested that the militarists might be able to cut a deal, they would use that as lever to split the Allies, and hold out to the last anyway to get the best deal possible. The militarist regimes had to be exterminated.

In addition, Hitler had been aided in seizing power by claiming that Germany hadn't been defeated on the battlefield, it had been sold out by weak-willed German political leadership -- with the implication that German military power would have otherwise carried the day. This time around, the lesson was going to be pounded in that Germans had taken on a fight that they were provably not big enough nor bad enough to win, and ensure that they wouldn't think of trying it again. Whether the policy of unconditional surrender made fighting the war more troublesome or less is impossible to say with real certainty, but it was a policy that was implemented for good reasons that had been thought out at length.

Still, for all the tough-sounding talk from his allies, Stalin was growing ever more impatient with the failure of the British and Americans to create a serious second front -- and though he had been given reassurances in 1942 that the British and Americans would invade Western Europe in 1943, their forces remained bogged down in Tunisia for the time being. The longer they stayed tied down, the less likely that it would be possible to mount the promised invasion.

[10.2] THE KATYN REVELATIONS

* In early spring, a crisis arose that threatened to undermine the alliance against Hitler. Britain had gone to war with Germany over Hitler's invasion of Poland, and the independence of Poland and the other states in Eastern Europe was a matter of great importance to the British. The Polish government-in-exile in London had good reasons to distrust Stalin, since the USSR had helped carve up their country in the first place. This distrust was greatly magnified when the Germans

announced on 13 April 1943 the discovery of the mass graves of Polish officers at Katyn near Smolensk.

When the mass graves were uncovered, Goebbels knew that he had a hot story on his hands. He also understood that few in neutral or enemy nations were going to believe a word he said, so an investigation was arranged under the direction of a panel that included anti-Nazis from neutral countries and even Allied prisoners of war. The evidence from the corpses dug up from the mass graves, who typically had a bullet hole in the back of the head, clearly dated the massacre back to the time when Smolensk was still in Soviet hands.

On 15 April, General Wladislaw Sikorski, the prime minister of the Polish government in exile in London, and the Polish ambassador to Britain met with Churchill. Churchill admitted he had little doubt that the Soviets were responsible for the mass executions, but pointed out that the bargaining position of the London Poles was very weak and that they should be circumspect how they handled the issue. They were not, going public the next day to protest and demand an investigation by the International Red Cross.

Stalin hardly seemed embarrassed by the matter at all, and in fact it played into his hands. On 21 April, he sent identical letters to Churchill and Roosevelt, denouncing the "anti-Soviet slander campaign" being orchestrated by the Germans and preposterously accused the London Poles of collusion with the Nazis. Koba said that the London Poles had, through this action, "severed its relations of alliance with the Soviet Union", which was a backwards way of declaring that he had withdrawn Soviet recognition of the Polish government-in-exile in London. The USSR now formally backed a group of Communist Poles living in the USSR, the "Union of Polish Patriots".

The Katyn revelations put the British and Americans in an impossible position. They could not get into a serious fight with their Soviet ally, however vicious Stalin might be, all the more so because there was little useful they could do if they did. Churchill energetically opposed any suggestion of a Red Cross investigation, and US Secretary of State Cordell Hull didn't want to press the matter, calling it a "piddling little thing". The issue was papered over, though the result was hardly a relaxation of tensions, particularly between Britain and the USSR. The British had few doubts that Stalin intended to keep the Polish territory he had seized; the real worry was that he intended to subjugate everything else the Red Army captured as well.

A few months later, General Sikorski was on a tour of Polish forces in the Mediterranean when the Consolidated Liberator bomber he was using as an air transport crashed after takeoff from Gibraltar, on 4 July 1943. Sikorski and most on board were killed; it was a major setback for the Free Polish cause since they lacked any other official of comparable stature and influence. There was considerable suspicion that NKVD agents might have arranged the accident, but aircraft accidents were by no means uncommon during the war and no investigation -- even one conducted by the Polish government over half a century later -- ever found evidence of foul play. However, it takes little imagination to suspect the death of Sikorski was viewed with considerable satisfaction from the Kremlin.

[10.3] PREPARING FOR BATTLE

* As the weather warmed in the Soviet Union in the early spring of 1943, Red Army soldiers poured into staging areas behind the front lines, while Soviet industry exerted itself to its utmost to roll out new tanks and planes and guns to make good the losses of the campaigns during 1942 and early 1943. The dislocations caused by the transfer of Soviet factories from the path of the German invaders in 1941 to sites beyond the Urals were largely repaired, and weapons poured off the assembly lines in increasing quantities. Yak fighters, Sturmovik ground-attack aircraft, and T-34 tanks went to the front in floods. Many would be destroyed, but even more would be built to take their place.

Nazi Germany was also deeply engaged in the production war. Although work continued on advanced weapons, priority was placed on the manufacture of modest refinements of existing weapons to ensure that production volumes were maintained. Over a half million more men were put into uniform, mostly by eliminating various exemptions. This brought the military back up to strength, at the expense of robbing German industry of skilled manpower.

Of course, Hitler was now fighting a war on two fronts, and though the Soviets were the immediate threat, the British were continuing the fight with characteristic doggedness and with increasing American assistance. The Americans were approaching full mobilization of their manpower and, more importantly, their industrial might, and they would soon present a threat from the West of comparable magnitude to the massive Red Army. Allied bombing raids siphoned off military resources to air defense, and Hitler needed more submarines to try to cut Britain's lifeline across the Atlantic to the US.

Propaganda Minister Goebbels, knowing the truth could not be hidden, shrewdly did not conceal the fact that Germany had taken battlefield reverses, and used them to call on Germans to make heroic sacrifices. Still, there was only so much defeat people could tolerate before their demoralization became irreversible. Germany's weak-tea allies -- Italy, Hungary, Rumania -- had already had their fill of the war and were quietly looking for a way out. Hitler needed major victories quickly.

Even Hitler knew that he was not in a position to give the Soviets a blow that would knock them out of the war. General Kurt Zeitzler came up with a more limited and apparently workable plan in early April 1943. The Red Army's push in February 1943 had left a great salient into German lines, centered around the city of Kursk. The salient was about 210 kilometers wide and 160 kilometers deep (130 by 100 miles), with the German side of the lines anchored at Orel in the north and at Belgorod, north of Kharkov, in the south. Zeitzler proposed that the German Army pinch off this salient with twin drives into its base, one from the north and one from the south, and wipe out all the Red Army forces trapped inside. The scheme was codenamed Operation ZITADEL (CITADEL).

It was a simple, direct plan, and it might have worked if it had been done at the earliest possible moment -- but that wasn't how it happened, it wasn't how it could have happened. The worst problem was that the Germans had lost too many tanks in the fighting up to that time, and the Mark III and Mark IV panzers that were in the ranks weren't the equal of the Soviet T-34 tank.

German industry had been working along several lines to develop tanks that could beat Soviet armor:

- The "Tiger I" tank, which had been in development for several years, featured thick armor and a hard-hitting 88 millimeter gun that could easily outrange the 76 millimeter gun of the T-34.
- Another new tank, the "Panther", had been developed in a hurry with the lessons taught by the T-34 in mind. The Panther featured sloping armor plus a long-barreled, high-velocity 75 millimeter gun.
- Finally, Dr. Ferdinand Porsche of the Porsche company had developed a heavily-armored monster assault gun known as the "Elefant", sometimes nicknamed the "Ferdinand" after Dr. Porsche. Adolf Hitler was enthusiastic about it, since really big weapons appealed to his megalomania, but many of the generals weren't so sure about the oversized beast.

All of these weapons were now going into production, and all were plagued with manufacturing glitches and teething problems. Hitler wanted to wait until he could build up adequate stocks of these new weapons before going ahead with CITADEL. The earliest possible date for the beginning of the operation was 3 May 1943. The entire effort was planned in maximum secrecy.

* The delays were a problem, but there was a bigger problem, one that Hitler wasn't aware of: Stalin knew all about CITADEL. Soviet intelligence from the Kursk sector reported the German troop buildup, and more significantly Stalin was getting detailed intelligence on German plans from a Red spy codenamed "Lucy". Lucy was really Rudolf Roessler, an anti-Nazi German living in Switzerland, who controlled an extensive spy ring.

Lucy's information was very accurate and it is still somewhat puzzling as to how he obtained it, since he died in the 1950s without revealing his sources. Some historians have proposed that the British might have been feeding him decrypted messages from the top-secret ULTRA codebreaking operation in England, using him as a filter to keep Stalin ignorant of ULTRA. This theory has been generally debunked, since there are no British records of any such activity -- while the record is clear that the British had been feeding the Soviets sanitized ULTRA information through the British military mission from the beginning of the war in the East.

Stalin was aware of CITADEL even before the initial orders for the operation went out to German forces in the field. Stalin sent Zhukov to the Kursk sector to consider options. On 8 April, Zhukov sent a message back to the Kremlin suggesting that instead of taking the offensive against the Germans there, it would be far more profitable to discreetly build up defenses and let the Germans smash themselves to pieces against them. That would weaken the Germans, and then the Red Army could build up forces to conduct an overwhelming counteroffensive. Stalin had learned a degree of respect for the abilities of his generals and accepted the recommendations. When Zhukov returned to Moscow on the evening of 11 April, he found the general staff working at a frantic pace to put together the plan for the operation.

As the plan emerged, the defense of the northern part of the salient was to be conducted by the "Central Front", under General Konstantin Rokossovsky. He commanded five field armies, a

tank army, an air army, and a number of smaller elements, facing German General Walter Model's 9th Army, part of Army Group Center under Kluge.

There were concerns in the Kremlin about Rokossovsky. He had been arrested during the purges, with the evidence presented against him including "testimony" from another officer who had actually been dead for almost twenty years, and had lost all of his teeth during his imprisonment, acquiring a full set of metal teeth as a replacement. Once released, he had proven his abilities again and again in combat, but he was overly independent, not a quality regarded as admirable in the Red Army. He was also generally pleasant and charismatic, a sharp contrast to the scowly and gruff personalities of Zhukov and most other senior Red Army officers. Zhukov kept an eye on him.

The defense of the southern part of the salient was to be conducted by the "Voronezh Front", under General Nikolai Vatutin. Its composition and size were similar to that of Rokossovsky's Central Front, and it was confronted with Papa Hoth's 4th Panzer Army, part of Manstein's Army Group South. Vatutin was a staff officer by background. He had requested a combat command in the summer of 1942. He had not distinguished himself in the fighting since that time, but he had his advocates who believed he had potential and so he had been given command of the front. Chief of Staff Vasilevsky went to the Voronezh Front to give him direction.

The two fronts were backed up by a huge reserve force, blandly designated the "Steppe Military District", of roughly similar size and composition to each of the two fronts. It was under the command of General Ivan Konev.

The Red Army built up layers of defenses inside the Kursk salient to slow down and trap Wehrmacht assaults, which would then become the targets of massive Soviet counterattacks. The defenders worked quickly, but as it turned out they were to be given time: on 20 April, Lucy reported that CITADEL had been postponed to some time after 3 May.

On 4 May, Hitler had a strategy session with his senior generals in Munich. Walter Model gave the Fuehrer unpleasant news, showing him reconnaissance photographs of the massive Soviet buildup in the salient. Model was an aristocratic officer, even affecting a monocle, and was egotistical to the point of comical. Those who had to work with him found him mean-spirited and unscrupulous, but he was a 100% Nazi. Hitler trusted him and always would trust him.

It seemed clear to the Fuehrer that the Soviets were expecting the attack. However, Hitler did not cancel CITADEL on the spot, and a hot debate followed. Manstein and Kluge said the offensive should go forward with no further delay, and Chief of Staff Zeitzler backed them up. Heinz Guderian, now back on duty as the inspector-general for German armored forces, was dead against it. He believed that Germany should take the time to properly rebuild armored forces before taking on new major offensive operations. Hitler, resting his hopes on the power of new German armor, waffled: CITADEL would go ahead, but no schedule was given for the start of the operation.

* By the middle of the month, Hitler had been confronted by another disruption to his plans when Axis forces in Tunisia finally surrendered to the Allies on 13 May, with about a quarter of

a million men taken prisoner, including roughly 100,000 Germans. Hitler had regarded North Africa as a sideshow and then funneled in resources when it was too late for him to win. The result was another serious setback for the Reich.

Even Stalin had to concede that this was a substantial victory. He was, however, furious when Roosevelt and Churchill informed him on 4 June that the protracted fight for North Africa had forced the postponement of the invasion of Western Europe to 1944. The British and Americans were planning a massive amphibious assault codenamed Operation HUSKY on Sicily in July, but Stalin did not regard HUSKY as a substitute for a second front.

Earlier in the year Stalin had given Molotov his opinion of the British and Americans: "The only thing they do is talk, nothing else." But for the moment, Koba had other things on his mind other than his despised allies.

* On the Eastern front, both sides continued to make preparations and train for the coming battle during the lull in action, but the delay helped the Red Army more. Many Soviet troops were extremely green, having been swept up by drafts and thrown into action with little if any training. With a period of idle time on their hands, the experienced soldiers, those who had survived the worst the Nazis could hit them with, were able to give them the valuable benefits of their experience.

Fortifications were constructed and minefields laid. Peasant villages that were in the way of the impending battle were relocated out of the front-line zone, a process that ended up being troublesome, with peasants fighting with pitchforks, stones, and whatever else was handy when Red Army troops tried to evict them from their homes. With very good reason, the peasants did not believe reassurances that there would be adequate shelter and provisions waiting for them at the end of their relocation. After some mad brawls, the decision was made to use NKVD units for such evictions in the future.

One way or another, the civilians were sent out of the way; the defenses were built, and supplies, ammunition, and weapons were accumulated. Not only did the Soviets have plenty of T-34 tanks, they also had small number of the "SU-152 self-propelled gun" or "assault gun", featuring a 152 millimeter howitzer mounted on a KV tank chassis, the gun fixed to fire forward with a limited traverse. The SU-152 was an improvisation, having been implemented in an unbelievable hurry, but it was still formidable. It was called the "zverboi (beast basher)", since it had the hitting power to take out the new German heavy tanks -- though only at dangerously short range.

In the meantime, partisans operating in the German rear played hell with German supply lines, blowing bridges and wrecking trains. In a short time, partisan attacks tripled, another hint that German secrecy had been compromised.

Finally, on 1 July, Hitler sent an order to Manstein that CITADEL would begin on 5 July. Soviet intelligence knew of the order within hours. The Red Army went to full alert. The Red Army had 1.3 million soldiers, backed by 3,500 tanks and 19,000 artillery pieces. The Germans had a million troops, with 2,700 tanks and 10,000 guns. Both sides remained quiet in hopes of surprising the other. It was so silent that the loudest noise was the sound of the wind rippling through the grass of the plains.

* On the afternoon of 4 July, Hoth performed a probe into Soviet lines to seize some hills that presented a threat to his line of advance. Things went quiet again for the night, though few were getting much sleep since last-minute preparations were under way on both sides. German planning envisioned drives forward using "armored wedge" formations, with heavy Tiger armor at the tip of the wedge; Panther, Mark III, and Mark IV tanks behind; with panzergrenadiers and mortar teams in half-tracks in the rear. The wedges would be supported by artillery and Stuka tank-busters fitted with a 37 millimeter cannon under each wing, Germany's somewhat improvised answer to the Red Sturmovik.

Soviet planning in turn involved large antitank minefields that would channel the German advance into "kill traps" plugged by dug-in batteries of antitank guns. The guns were backed up by heavy artillery and Katyusha rocket launchers, along with mobile armored formations that could respond to threats as needed. The Soviets had made full use of their skills at combat engineering and concealment to make their traps as devious as possible.

Soviet artillery began the fight in the small hours of the morning, blasting away at the Germans with heavy guns and Katyusha launchers in a preemptive attack. Since the fire was not generally directed at highly specific targets, it was more noisy than dangerous, but it did interfere with German organization. At dawn, the German tanks went forward under the cover of Stukas. Although the Red Army had been expecting the assault, the weight of the German attack was so great that the front lines of the Soviet defenses crumbled. Still, there were further layers to the defenses and as the Germans drove into them, the momentum of the assault gradually ground down.

The Red Air Force was out in numbers and contesting the Luftwaffe for air supremacy, with roughly 2,000 German warplanes against 3,000 Soviet aircraft. The Germans still held the edge in the sky, with generally better equipment and superior training, but their advantage had narrowed greatly from the early days of the war in the East.

Sturmoviks and other attack aircraft pounded German armor and positions. Soviet mobile formations were sent to threatened sectors, while Red combat engineers swiftly laid minefields ahead of the Wehrmacht advance. The Tigers proved hard to kill, but the Panthers were vulnerable since they were still unreliable and their crews were poorly trained. The Elephants were even less useful, being not merely prone to breakdowns but also slow and painfully vulnerable to attacks by Red Army anti-tank pioneer teams armed with explosive charges. By the time the sun went down, the southern prong of the German advance had advanced all of 18 kilometers (11 miles) into Soviet lines. The northern prong had advanced only 10 kilometers (6 miles).

Still, the Germans had yet to commit all their forces. Model kept up the pressure from the north, only to meet with stubborn resistance that piled up bodies and wreckage on both sides. By 10 July the northern prong had spent its force, having advanced only another 10 kilometers. Both sides continued to fire on each other, with both sides stubbornly refusing to give any ground.

On the southern side of the salient the Germans made better progress, spearheaded by the elite 2nd SS Panzer Corps under Hausser. On 12 July, Hoth began a major push with his armor, only to find that by coincidence the Red Army had also planned a big armored push in precisely the opposite direction. The resulting head-on collision was one of the biggest tank battles of the war.

On the early morning of 12 July 1943, 850 tanks of the Soviet Fifth Guards Tank Army, under Lieutenant General Pavel Rotmistrov, ran into the 600 tanks of the 2nd SS Panzer near the village of Prokhorovka. The Soviets were mostly equipped with T-34s, while German force featured about a hundred Tigers. Although the Tigers could in principle stand off at long range and destroy T-34s with impunity, due to the surprise of the engagement and the nature of the terrain -- dotted with hedges and small clumps of trees that provided cover -- the T-34s were able to close with the German armor, resulting in a violent and confused close-quarters brawl.

Soon the battlefield was hazy with dust and the smoke of burning tanks. Luftwaffe and Red Air Force close-support aircraft and fighters streaked overhead, contributing to the confusion. An armor-piercing round slamming into a tank would set off its ammunition and blow its turret off, sending it flying through the air. T-34s were able to isolate and destroy Tigers, pounding on the relatively thin side and back armor from close range. By afternoon, there were hundreds of dead tanks and tankers on the field. Hausser's panzers had been forced to pull back to a defensive position, where they held their ground against repeated attacks by Red armor.

Hoth wanted to commit General Werner Kempf's 3rd Panzer Corps, with about 300 tanks, to the battle, but that prong of Hoth's offensive had been trying to grind forward against stubborn opposition and was mostly on the wrong side of the Donets river, to the southeast of the battlefield.

3rd Panzer had been able to get a bridgehead over the river at the town of Rzhevets the night before, 11 July, through a trick. A Major Franz Baeke led a small column of armor through Soviet lines, with a captured T-34 in the lead to deceive Red Army sentinels. It worked, but then the T-34 broke down, blocking the road. The Germans had to get out and push the steel monster off the road, while Soviet troops in the area idly watched the Germans laboring in the dark. Some of the Germans even forgot themselves and muttered "scheisse! (shit!)" and the like, but nobody caught on.

Farther up the road, Baeke's column passed a column of T-34s heading the other way. The Germans held their breath and the two columns passed, but then the Soviets got suspicious and a number of T-34s turned around to investigate. There was a very tense moment -- and then firing broke out, resulting in a confused fight at point-blank range. Baeke's column managed to make its way into Rzhevets and hold on until reinforcements arrived in the morning.

However, 3rd Panzer spent most of 12 July simply reassembling, and wasn't able to join 2nd SS Panzer until the morning of 13 July. Fighting had died down by that time, with each side having suffered the loss of about 300 tanks. 3rd Panzer's arrival more or less made good German losses and it is likely that a renewal of the battle would have not gone well for the Soviets, but then the order came down to the Germans: break off combat. The operation had been called off by the Fuehrer.

That day, 13 July, Kluge and Manstein had been summoned to Hitler's headquarters at Rastenburg in East Prussia, where they found the Fuehrer in a nasty mood and the staff officers sunk in gloom. Hitler briefed Manstein on the situation, which was not good: HUSKY, the Allied landings on Sicily, had begun on 10 July. The Italians were not putting up much effective resistance, and in fact it seemed very likely that Italy was going to throw in the towel in the near future.

Kluge was happy to recall Model, since his efforts in the Kursk salient were going nowhere and, as discussed later, the Red Army was exerting pressure on Army Group Center to the north. Manstein protested, since he believed that if he broke off combat the Soviets would simply hit him farther to the south, where Army Group South was more vulnerable. Hitler granted Manstein permission to keep on fighting, and the struggle on the southern flank of the Kursk salient went

on for another six days, with the battle increasingly bogged down in driving rains until it fizzled out.

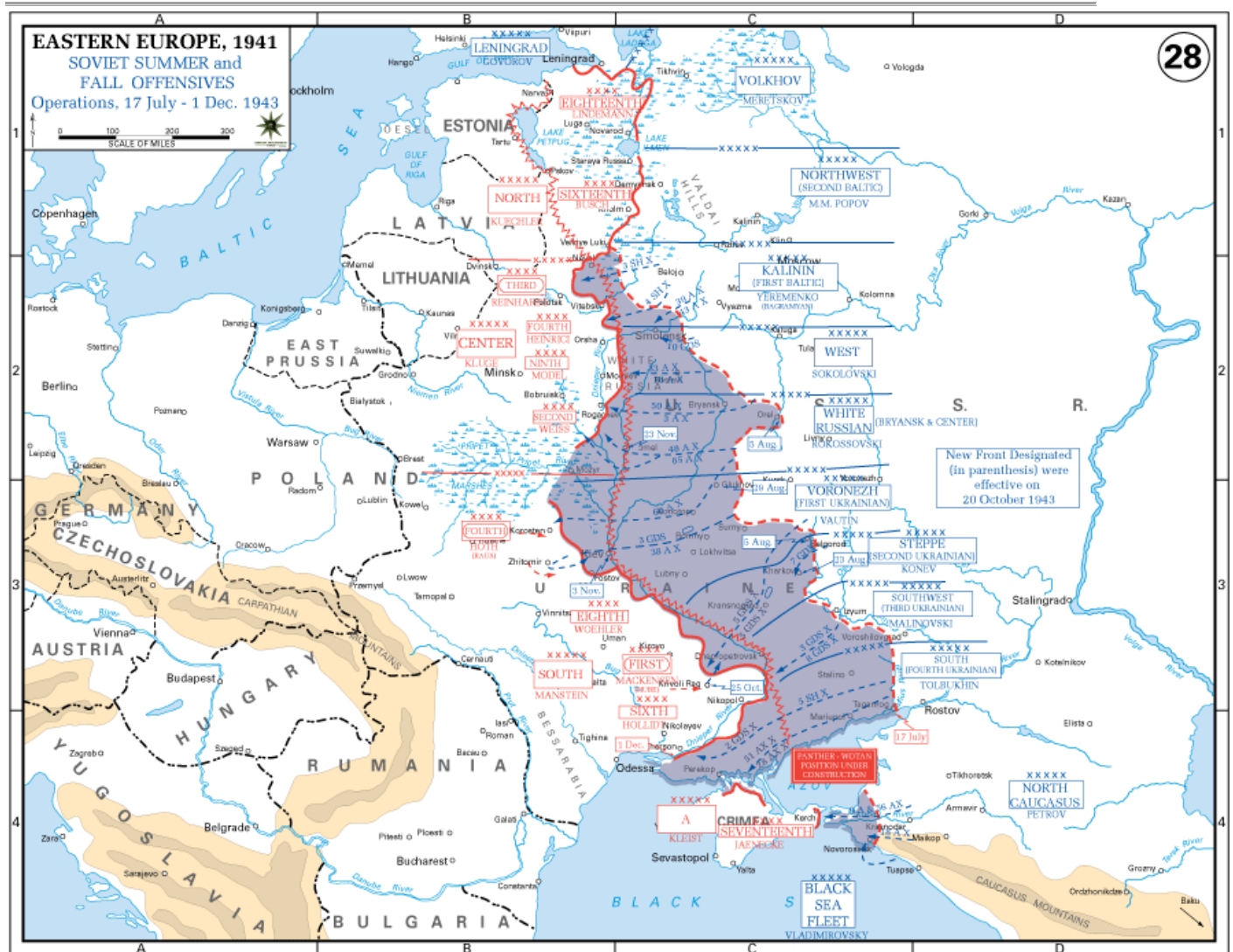
* That was the end of CITADEL. The Germans had lost about 100,000 men, with about a third of them killed, and Soviet losses were at least as great. However, the Red Army could afford such losses much better than the Germans. The Germans had lost too many panzers and they would never be able to rebuild their armored forces to adequate levels.

The battle of Kursk was, in a sense, the high point of the war in the East. Enormous battles lay ahead, but in the global reportage of the time and in histories afterward, they would not seem so prominent. Events elsewhere would steal headlines, and besides, whatever the scale of operations conducted by the Red Army for the rest of the conflict, the outcome was an almost completely forgone conclusion: the Germans would be ground steadily down towards defeat.

[11.0] The Germans Fall Back

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* The Red Army had not inflicted a defeat on the Wehrmacht at Kursk without suffering injury itself, but the Soviets had hardly exhausted themselves, while the Germans were strained to the utmost. The Soviets pushed the invaders back, and by the end of 1943, the Germans could only look back on the war in the East for that year as a string of disastrous defeats. With the coming of winter, the Allies met at Tehran to discuss how to finish the Axis off.



[11.1] THE RECAPTURE OF BELGOROD, OREL, & KHARKOV

* The end of CITADEL didn't stop the fighting in the region. The German offensive into the Kursk salient had jumped off from Orel in the north and Belgorod in the south; in effect, the area around these cities amounted to twin salients into Soviet lines, and even before the shooting in the Kursk battle died down, the Red Army was on the roll to pinch the two salients off.

The attack on the Orel salient, codenamed Operation KUTUZOV after the great Russian general of the Napoleonic Wars, began on 12 July 1943. Twin prongs were launched against Orel, with the Central Front under Rokossovsky advancing out of the Kursk salient towards the south of the city, and the Bryansk Front under Lieutenant General Markian Popov moving towards the north of the city. A third prong, the West Front under Lieutenant General Vasily Sokolovsky, also jumped across German lines north of the Soviet-held town of Kirov, well up the line from Orel.

The Soviets forces involved in KUTUZOV outnumbered their German opponents by a rough factor of two-to-one in both men and equipment, and the Red Army made good progress at first. However, on 13 July Model was put in charge of the 2nd Panzer army to conduct the defense of the area, and he did so skillfully. The Germans had built up extensive field defenses around Orel and the Soviets found it very nasty going.

Manstein's stubborn resistance in the Kursk salient delayed the offensive against Belgorod into August, since the Red Army had to take the time to refit and resupply. On 2 August, German signals intelligence reported to Manstein that Soviet radio traffic had risen very sharply and that an attack was certain within the next few days. The offensive jumped off at dawn the next day, 3 August, with Vatutin's Voronezh Front driving south to the west of Belgorod and Konev's Steppe Front driving to the east of the city. The Soviet advantage over the Germans in the region was even greater than it was in the north -- about three-to-one in men and equipment.

The German defense around Belgorod was disrupted beyond any salvation, and the Germans fell back on Kharkov, to the south of Belgorod, to set up a new defensive line. On 5 August 1943, the Red Army retook Belgorod, the same day that Orel was finally retaken by Soviet forces. However, Model got his 2nd Panzer Army out of Orel in good order, with his troops falling back to a new defensive line across the base of the Orel salient.

The recapture of Belgorod and Orel put Stalin in a good mood, and he ordered fireworks and artillery salutes in Moscow to celebrate. Some of the citizens thought an air raid was in progress and took shelter. Stalin issued an order commemorating the victory, saying that the Red Army had proven that it could conduct and win a summer offensive, and concluding: "Eternal glory to the heroes who fell in the struggle for the freedom of our country. Death to the German invaders!" There was something in this snappy bit of rhetoric that resonated with Stalin, and the same words would be used to commemorate every victory from that time on.

* Belgorod was only a way station for the Red Army's thrust into the Donets Basin. Kharkov was a bigger prize. Not only was it one of the biggest Soviet cities to fall into German hands, but its

recapture by the Germans earlier in the year was a particular humiliation for Stalin that had to be avenged. Hitler just as stubbornly demanded that it not be given up: "Kharkov must be held at all costs."

Vatutin's Voronezh Front advanced towards Akhtrya, to the west of Kharkov, in hopes of cutting off and isolating the Germans. The Germans reacted quickly, resulting in a battle that began on 7 August. After brutal fighting, the German 19th Panzer Division and 48th Panzer Corps managed to stabilize the line around Akhtrya and halt Vatutin's advance. On 10 August, Konev, eager to outshine Vatutin, launched his Steppe Front against Kharkov and managed to penetrate into the eastern suburbs of the city, only to be driven back out of the city by a furious German counterattack.

Vatutin, going nowhere at Akhtrya, sent General Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army to fall on Kharkov from the northwest. Soviet tanks drove into the German defenses on the morning of 19 August. They were met by the German 11th Corps under General Erhard Raus, a tough and combative Austrian. His defense was led by the 6th Panzer Division. The first attack was a bloody failure, with Rotmistrov losing at least 184 tanks and driven off. He came back again the next day, 20 August, losing 150 tanks and being driven off again. That night, he tried a third time, losing about 80 more tanks. Three T-34s did manage to make it into the city, where they raised hell and confusion until they were destroyed.

The Soviets had been taking a beating, but the Germans were by no means undamaged themselves. The 6th Panzer division had been almost completely wrecked, with only 15 tanks left. Once again, Manstein was a realist, and he knew the Red Army could and would win this battle of attrition, probably with the next push. Manstein decided to withdraw. Hitler protested that the loss of the city would undermine Germany's credibility with the country's Axis allies. Manstein was unmoved: there was no question that Kharkov was lost, the only question was whether the Reich wanted to lose the 11th Corps along with it.

Hitler sullenly agreed with the decision to withdraw, and Manstein ordered Raus to pull out on 22 August. The Red Army moved back into Kharkov, this time for good. The tide was now flowing strongly against the Nazis.

[11.2] TO THE DNIEPER

* The Red Army was also hammering on Manstein from the southeast. The Soviet Southern Front, under Lieutenant General F.I. Tolbukhin, had jumped over the Donets River and was now trying to push on to the Crimea. Manstein knew that the defense of the entire Donetz Basin had become unhinged, and he made a pointed request back to Berlin: either he would be given a half-dozen panzer divisions, or he would fall back across the Dnieper, where he could set up a solid defensive line that was shielded by a wide river: "I request freedom of movement."

Hitler replied that they would discuss the matter at his advance field headquarters, codenamed "Werewolf", at Vinnitsa in the western Ukraine. The meeting took place on 27 August. Hitler

seemed bewildered as Manstein's officers outlined the comparative strength Red Army forces operating against Army Group South: the Germans were outnumbered at least four to one in every respect. Manstein then hit the Fuehrer again: either provide reinforcements, or authorize a withdrawal behind the Dnieper. Manstein proposed that reinforcements could be transferred from Kluge's Army Group Center. Hitler waffled, but Manstein rightly insisted that a decision had to be made immediately. Hitler caved in, ordered the transfer, and went back home.

* Whatever relief Manstein got out of this concession was short-lived. The next day, 28 August, the Red Army smashed into Army Group Center. Kluge was under far too much pressure to spare any forces. Manstein's fortunes were no better, since the same day the Soviet Southern Front broke through his lines, trapping the German 29th Corps up against the shores of the Sea of Azov.

Everything that Manstein had feared was now coming true very quickly. Manstein called Hitler and arranged a conference at the Fuehrer's "Wolf's Lair" headquarters in East Prussia. The meeting took place on 3 September, with Kluge in attendance as well. The two field marshals presented a united front, proposing that the top military command be consolidated under a military officer who would act as a supreme commander.

Hitler had no intention of giving up his powers and flatly rejected the proposal. The most he was willing to do was authorize a few modest retreats. As if to underline the inadequacy of these half-measures, later that day news arrived that the Western Allies had landed in Italy. The Red Army had also renewed its pressure, the Southwest Front smashing through German lines and Rokossovsky's Central Front driving a wedge between German Army Group Center and Army Group South.

Manstein repeated his request for freedom of action. The Fuehrer flew to Manstein's forward headquarters at Zaporozhye in the Ukraine on 8 September. Manstein bluntly stated that a withdrawal behind the Dnieper was absolutely necessary. Hitler replied: NO. He did promise Manstein reinforcements from Army Group Center, but it is difficult to believe that Manstein thought for an instant this was even possible. It wasn't. The next day, 9 September, an exasperated Manstein called up chief of staff Zeitzler and told him: "Kindly inform the Fuehrer that he may expect the beginning of a disastrous Soviet breakthrough to the Dnieper at any moment."

* The moment came five days later, on 14 September. In a two-pronged offensive, Rokossovsky's Central Front smashed through German lines to advance on Kiev from the northeast, while Vatutin's Voronezh Front moved on the city from the southeast. Manstein simply informed Berlin that he intended to begin a withdrawal to the Dnieper come the morning. He met with the Fuehrer at the Wolf's Lair the next day, 15 September. Hitler had little choice but to agree to the retreat.

This was welcome to Manstein, but far from a miracle cure. Hitler's refusal to consider retreat up to that time meant that no real advance work had been done for a withdrawal under fire, always a difficult operation. Although German propaganda had been boasting about the "East Wall" of

defenses along the west bank of the Dnieper, in reality little work had been done to build fortifications there. Hitler had judged that doing so would have guaranteed a retreat.

Manstein still managed to pull it off, and the Germans took the time to perform Operation SCORCHED EARTH, taking everything that could be moved and destroying everything that couldn't. When time and resources permitted it, mines and devious booby traps were sown in numbers. The region was simply "sterilized". Hundreds of thousands of livestock were taken, along with about 280,000 Soviet citizens who were to be put to work as slave laborers.

The season had been unusually rainy, bogging down both the Germans and the Soviets in the mud. German forces reached the Dnieper on 21 September, crossing at Kanev about 105 kilometers (65 miles) south of Kiev, with the Red Army right behind them. Partisan fighters radioed that there were no Germans on the west bank of the Dnieper near the "Bukrin Bend" in the river, about 16 kilometers (10 miles) north of Kanev. Both the Red Army and the Germans got the message and a race began.

The Red Army got there first, sending a company across during the night to join partisan fighters. More forces flowed in during the day. The Germans countered with troops and reinforcements of their own and the fighting escalated, with the Soviets gradually expanding the bridgehead.

On 24 September, three brigades of Red Army paratroopers, about 7,000 men, were airdropped on the bridgehead. The Red Army had been a pioneer of paratroop operations as far back as the early 1930s, but that effort had been derailed by the purges, and this was the first Soviet large-scale operational drop. It was hideously bungled. The paratroopers were poorly trained -- it seems some had never actually performed a parachute jump before -- and the transports flew in without coordination, dropping the soldiers almost at random, many falling over German troop concentrations to be shot as they descended. Those that landed alive were quickly hunted down. Only about 2,300 of them managed to escape and join partisan fighters.

Stalin was furious at the fiasco. He continued to pump reinforcements into the Bukrin bridgehead with blind determination, though days of fighting produced no results. The Soviets stayed bottled up in the bridgehead, with little to show for their efforts but growing casualty lists.

[11.3] THE RECAPTURE OF KIEV

* The Red Army managed to get small forces across the Dnieper in several other places, but the Germans reacted quickly each time and these other bridgeheads didn't go anywhere, either. However, on the night of 26 September, elements of the Soviet Thirty-Eighth Army established another bridgehead at Lyutezh, about 20 kilometers (12 miles) north of Kiev and upstream from the confluence of the Dnieper and the Desna River.

The Germans pounced on this penetration and bottled it up as well. Voronezh Front commander Vatutin decided, without much hope of success, to see if he could expand the bridgehead. He

ordered Lieutenant General A.G. Kravchenko, head of the armored corps of the Fifth Guards Army, to get his tanks there as fast as possible.

Kravchenko's armor had to get over the Desna. There was no bridge in the area, but local fishermen pointed out where the river could be forded. The ford was over two meters (seven feet) deep and Kravchenko's T-34s weren't rigged for snorkeling, but the tankers managed to seal them up and get 90 of them across. There was no way to ford the Dnieper in such a way, but Kravchenko's men found two damaged barges that could carry three tanks each, and managed to get most of their armor across the river during the night of 5 October, with the rest following during the day. They quickly expanded the bridgehead, but the Germans once again reacted fast and the Soviets quickly bogged down.

However, Vatutin was becoming more optimistic about the Lyutezh bridgehead, believing that if he just had the resources to push harder he would be able to break out. Unfortunately, Moscow remained focused on the Bukrin bridgehead downstream. Vatutin's political commissar, the noisy and energetic Lieutenant General Nikita Krushchev, lobbied the Kremlin to reconsider.

The general staff finally realized that the Bukrin bridgehead was a lost cause and decided to shift the effort to the Lyutezh bridgehead. In the last week of October, the Soviet Third Guards Army quietly moved from the Bukrin bridgehead north, moving at night to keep the Germans in the dark. Strict radio silence was observed, with the radio operators left in their original positions to continue their chatter as if an entire army were still there. Dummy tanks were set up in the old positions as well. The rains continued, further helping to conceal the transfer of troops and equipment.

Vatutin loaded up the Lyutezh bridgehead with troops and armor, backed up by 2,000 guns and mortars along with 500 Katyusha rocket launchers. The Germans were hit by a thunderous bombardment on at dawn on 3 November, followed 40 minutes later by the advance of six infantry divisions of the Thirty-Eighth Army and a tank corps of the Fifth Guards Army. The German defense crumbled and the Third Guards Army followed through the breach. Soviet forces entered Kiev on the evening of 5 November, and by 7 November, the 26th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, the city had been cleaned of German forces.

A half-million Germans and Soviets, soldiers and civilians, had died in the Dnieper campaign. Of all the Red Army soldiers who were awarded the prestigious Hero of the Soviet Union decoration, almost half won it on the banks of the Dnieper. Kiev had been reduced to a rubble heap. Stalin celebrated his triumph in Moscow with fireworks and artillery salutes.

Stalin spoke to the Soviet people, as he always did on 7 November. He stood in front of a crowd at the Kremlin, bathed in orchestrated applause that was kept going until the audience could clap no more. He was now triumphant and boasted in complete truth of the Red Army's great victories. He gave little credit to the people, the "little cogs in the machine", who had actually done it. As always, their deaths were only a matter of sums on a sheet to him, a resource to be expended to achieve his goals.

* With the massive movement of Soviet forces, the various fronts in the campaign were redesignated:

- Rokossovsky's Central Front became the "Belorussian Front".
- Vatutin's Voronezh Front became the "First Ukrainian Front".
- Konev's Steppe Front became the "Second Ukrainian Front".
- Malinovsky's Southwest Front became the "Third Ukrainian Front".
- Tolbukhin's South Front became the "Fourth Ukrainian Front".

The Red Army kept up the momentum for the moment. There were increasing cases of German troops inflicting wounds on themselves in hopes of escaping to the rear. Such wounds could be detected by powder burns and the unlucky soldiers were usually quickly court-martialed and shot.

Once again, however, the Germans still proved they shouldn't be underestimated. When the First Guards Tank Army took Zhitomir, about 70 kilometers (45 miles) to the southwest of Kiev, Papa Hoth saw that the Soviets were out on a limb and counterattacked on 14 November, throwing the First Guards out of the city after five days of tough fighting. It was smartly done, though it did Hoth little good. Hitler needed miracles to win the war now, and even Hoth couldn't deliver miracles. The Fuehrer soon sacked him for failing to recapture Kiev. In any case, the battle for Zhitomir was the last of the major fighting in the East for 1943.

Stalin was not happy with the reversal at Zhitomir and sent Rokossovsky to Vatutin's First Ukrainian Front headquarters to check up on Vatutin and relieve him of command if it seemed necessary. Rokossovsky got a chilly welcome from Vatutin and his staff, but Vatutin soon realized that Rokossovsky had taken his instructions from the Kremlin with a grain of salt. Rokossovsky was on the front lines and knew that some reverses could be expected in combat, however much Moscow might be displeased with them. Overall, things had gone very well for the Red Army in the campaign and there was no reason to do more than examine the mistakes made and determine the proper corrections for the future.

Things had not gone so well for the Germans. Hitler had stubbornly held on to the Donetz and only authorized a retreat to the Dnieper at the last moment. Thanks to the haste of the withdrawal and the lack of preparation of defenses, now the Dnieper line had been compromised, almost certainly beyond repair. The Fuehrer's forces in the East had been badly battered, and the resources were not available to rebuild them to adequate strength. It was obvious to everyone in the German high command that the Western Allies would land in somewhere in Western Europe sometime in the coming year. If the invasion succeeded, the British and Americans would soon be at Germany's borders. Building up forces to meet the threat in the West took priority.

[11.4] THE TEHRAN CONFERENCE

* 1943 had been a good year for the Allies, with significant accomplishments in all theaters. Now it was time for the leadership to confer and decide what to do next. Roosevelt had never

met Stalin personally and had been pushing to arrange a meeting with him, with the president believing that his own personal diplomacy, in which he had great faith and with a fair amount of good reason, could carry the day with the Soviet dictator. Over a year earlier, Roosevelt had written Churchill:

BEGIN QUOTE:

I know you will not mind my being brutally frank when I tell you I think I can personally handle Stalin better than your Foreign Office or my State Department. Stalin hates the guts of all your top people. He thinks he likes me better, and I hope he will continue to do so.

END QUOTE

Roosevelt had tried to set up a meeting with Stalin from that time, but Koba had persistently rejected the idea, only coming around to agree in September 1943. To pave the way for a top-level meeting, at Stalin's suggestion, in October 1943 US Secretary of State Cordell Hull and British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden flew to Moscow to confer with Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov. Molotov pressed Hull and Eden on the eternal Soviet demand for a second front and was assured, much to his satisfaction, that there would be an invasion of France come the spring.

Part of Cordell Hull's agenda was to push a "Four-Power Declaration", in which the US, Britain, the USSR, and China publicly committed to the creation of an organization that would help keep the peace in the postwar world. Molotov was skeptical, in particular criticising the American notion that China was a "great power" -- the Soviets not only regarded China as a negligible military power, they also did not want to provoke trouble with Japan and risk a fight on two fronts -- but agreed in the end. The first step had been taken towards the formation of the United Nations. Hull regarded it as one of the high points of his career.

The preliminaries done, the "Big Three" -- Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin -- arrived in Tehran, Iran, for their conference on 18 November 1943. Tehran had been chosen at Stalin's insistence. He did not like to travel far, probably less because of the inconvenience of travel itself than because he feared being out of control of things even for a short period of time.

While Roosevelt was determined to push through a second front in France in 1944, Churchill had been resisting the idea, believing that the Mediterranean and Norway would be easier and more productive targets. The result was a showdown between the president and the prime minister at Tehran, with Roosevelt conducting several one-on-one meetings with Stalin so Churchill could be kept out of the loop. Churchill had always done everything he could to keep Roosevelt and Stalin from meeting by themselves, though Churchill had repeatedly met with Stalin by himself, and Roosevelt was no doubt partly showing Churchill that the President of the United States set his own agenda.

Churchill made a case at length for operations in the Mediterranean, but the American and Soviet delegations formed a common front against him. Even if all of Italy was conquered by the Allies,

they would be stopped cold by the Alps; similarly, the rugged Balkans hardly provided a convenient highway to the Reich. The only straightforward path from the West that could be used to drive a spearhead into Germany was France. The invasion of France, codenamed OVERLORD, would proceed on 1 May 1944. When the decision was made, Stalin gave Churchill a glance that everyone present read as: *There! So what do you think about that?!*

Koba pressed Roosevelt to name a commander for OVERLORD, saying that it would be hard to believe the plan was for real unless someone was assigned to take charge. The president said it would be done but that the matter needed more consideration, a response that Stalin clearly found baffling: Consensus? What point was there in that? As far as Stalin was concerned, people just did what he told them to do. Whatever; there were other items to be discussed:

- As for the independence of the Baltics, Stalin refused to discuss the matter, saying that the peoples of the Baltic states had "freely joined" the USSR.
- As for Poland, Churchill and Roosevelt accepted that the USSR would hang on to the territories seized from Poland, but Stalin promised that the Poles would be compensated by land taken from Germany. The agreements on Poland were kept secret.
- An agreement was reached that Iran would remain intact and independent after the end of the war.
- Tentative ideas were floated about dismembering Germany into smaller states that could not have the power to become a threat again.
- All three leaders committed to the creation of a United Nations organization, a matter near and dear to Roosevelt's heart.
- The president was also very pleased that Stalin indicated an intent to join the war against Japan once the Germans had been settled -- though the Soviet agreement in principle on that matter was to be kept a deep secret lest it draw the USSR into the war against Japan before Germany had been defeated.

Stalin was happy with the Tehran conference, having got a firm commitment on the Second Front. Roosevelt was happy as well, having got all he wanted. The issue of Poland clearly remained troublesome, but the president did not feel that American interests were strongly affected by the affairs of Eastern Europe, and to the extent that he felt it was important, his motivation was mostly to reassure Polish-American voters. There was little Roosevelt could do about it in any case.

After the conference, the president would privately describe his one-on-one discussions with Stalin in glowing terms, saying that the "ice was broken" and they "talked like men and brothers." In hindsight that has a fatuous sound to it; some who knew the president suggested in response that was just his politician's instinct to "embroider the picture" at work, painting the scene in the most optimistic colors. Still, Roosevelt had good reason to be satisfied with the results.

Churchill was less happy about the outcome. Britain had gone to war over Polish independence, and was the primary backer of the Polish government-in-exile in London. The prime minister could only feel uneasy about making deals over Poland behind the backs of the Free Polish

leadership. Churchill also remained concerned, some might say obsessed, over operations in the eastern Mediterranean -- though not at the expense of OVERLORD.

* There was time for ceremony at the conference. Churchill honored Stalin by formally presenting him with a ceremonial sword, the "Sword of Stalingrad". Stalin seemed honestly moved; tears flowing from his eyes, he kissed the sword. He then passed the sword to his old crony Marshal Voroshilov, who ruined the moment by dropping it.

There were less affectionate scenes. When the discussion got around about what to do about Germany once the country was defeated, Stalin suggested shooting 50,000 to 100,000 German officers. Churchill went red-faced with fury and protested loudly. Roosevelt saw that Stalin was toying with Churchill and went along with the gag, suggesting that 49,000 would be sufficient. Churchill stomped out of the room, though Stalin and Molotov followed and managed to calm him down, assuring them that it was just a joke.

Of course it was, since Stalin would have never discussed any of his crimes in such an environment. What Churchill understood was that Stalin regarded the murder of tens of thousands of people as something of a joke in the first place. In hindsight, however, Roosevelt's comment about only shooting 49,000 officers remains one of the more ambiguous remarks of a man who was an artist of ambiguity. Roosevelt was showing signs of increasing disgust as revelations continued to appear about Nazi atrocities in occupied territories. There was no way America was going to participate in the mass extermination of the German officer corps, nor fail to protest if the Soviets shot the lot of them -- but the protests might not be very heartfelt if they did. How much Roosevelt was actually joking is forever impossible to say.

* In any case, Stalin had got his second front, or would in the near future. The Western Allies had every reason to keep their word to him, however dimly they might have been aware of it at the time. If they did not advance on German from the west, the Red Army juggernaut would continue until, sooner or later, it reached the Atlantic. In the long run, the second front was as much or more an operation to frustrate Stalin as it was to defeat Hitler.

Roosevelt recorded considerable satisfaction with the outcome of the Tehran conference. Churchill was considerably less happy with the results, as well he might have been, since he had been effectively sidelined by his two allies. The prime minister's suspicions of the Soviets remained at full steam. In early 1944, PRAVDA ran an article that the British were engaged in secret negotiations with the Germans -- and there was no way such an article would have been published without the knowledge and consent of Stalin.

Churchill wrote him an irritable letter denying the report: "We never thought of making a separate peace even in the year when we were all alone when we could have easily made one without serious loss to the British Empire and largely at your expense. Why should we think of it now, when our triple fortunes are marching to victory?" Churchill grumbled privately: "Trying to maintain good relations with a Communist is like wooing a crocodile. You do not know whether to tickle it under the chin or beat it over the head. When it opens its mouth, you do not know if it is trying to smile, or preparing to eat you up."

To the extent that Hitler knew about the squabbles between Stalin and his allies from news reports and German intelligence, he found it all a bit baffling. The Fuehrer of course had plenty of unpleasant experience himself in what it was like to have Stalin as an ally, but found the provocations thrown out by the Kremlin irrational, with Goebbels writing in his diary: "The Fuehrer cannot understand it. If he was in that position he would soft-soap them more."

Partly that conclusion was due to the fact that Hitler believed that the Soviets were much weaker than they actually were, that the fighting during 1943 had bled them to their last legs. Even at the moment, he was receiving strong evidence that he was underestimating them.

* Stalin began 1944 by directing Mikhail Kalinin, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet and in principle the "leader" of the Soviet State, to read a speech to the Soviet people, praising Stalin for driving the Germans out of half of the Soviet territory they had seized. Stalin liked to toy with Kalinin, like a puppet on strings. Kalinin's wife was in the Gulag, and though he pleaded with Stalin to have her freed, the Great Leader refused.

The Red Army had pushed back the Germans during the height of summer. In the depths of winter the Red Army was comparatively even more powerful, and was pressing its advantage, engaging in three offensives through December and January. One of the offensives was to relieve Leningrad and shove the Germans out of the northwestern regions of the USSR, while the other two would fall on the Germans in the Ukraine and in the Crimea.

The Leningrad offensive was the least important in strictly military terms, The city was actually in no great danger any longer. There had been a lifeline to Leningrad since the late winter of 1941, and it had been expanded and strengthened since that time. The Red Army and the Germans faced each other in sets of fortified lines that prevented the two sides from doing much more than trading somewhat indifferent, if still murderous, artillery barrages. Leningrad's citizens had long acquired the ability to react quickly to the sound of incoming shells, cart off the dead and wounded, clean up the damage, and then go on about their business.

In effect, Leningrad was helping to keep German Army Group North uselessly pinned down. The commander of Army Group North, Field Marshall Georg von Kuechler, had seen his command looted of troops to deal with the emergencies to the south; he had no good reason to remain where he was and was vulnerable, so in the summer of 1943 he had begun to plan an orderly withdrawal about 240 kilometers (150 miles) southwest to a fortified line known as the "Panther Position".

Considerable work had been done to build up the Panther Position. By the end of the year it was very strong, and well-supplied with large stockpiles of food. Kuechler expected to withdraw to the Panther Position in January 1944, but he failed to understand the Fuehrer's insecurity over retreats of any kind. When the field marshal spoke with Hitler about the matter at the Wolf's Lair in East Prussia on 30 December 1943, Kuechler incautiously commented that the German lines around Leningrad were very solid, if undermanned. That was enough for Hitler: he refused to authorize a withdrawal.

Whatever misgivings Kuechler felt about this would have been greatly enhanced if he had understood Soviet intentions. The siege of Leningrad had gone on for years, becoming a symbol of Soviet resistance, and Stalin was now determined to see the siege lifted. Kuechler's 18th Army, under General Georg Lindemann, was confronted in the north by the Leningrad Front, under General L.A. Govorov, and the Volkov Front in the east, under General Kirill Meretskoy. Both fronts had been receiving massive reinforcements and by the end of 1943 were massively superior to Kuechler's forces.

German intelligence badly fell down on the job. For example, shipping had been observed moving back and forth between Leningrad and Oranienbaum, southwest of Leningrad on the Baltic coast and the nucleus of a "pocket" in German lines, but nobody clearly grasped the

significance of this activity. In fact, the ships were bringing in the powerful Soviet Second Shock Army. Govorov wanted to use it as half of a pincers movement, with the Forty-Second Army moving out of the defenses in the Leningrad area as the other half, to bag the Germans concentrated in that area.

That done, Govorov's forces would operate as half of a still-larger pincers, with Meretskov's Fifty-Ninth Army smashing through the German lines around Novgorod in the east to operate as the other half of the pincers. In principle, the entire German 18th Army would be encircled and destroyed.

* The attack jumped off before dawn on 14 January 1944, with Red Army guns dumping 100,000 shells on German positions. The Soviet assault made good progress, though it was slowed by unseasonably warm weather that thawed the ground and sometimes created thick fogs that kept aircraft grounded. Kuechler and Lindemann were not too worried for the moment, since the Soviets had made attacks into their lines before that had always eventually been broken and thrown back by reserve units.

Kuechler and Lindemann still did not understand the magnitude of the Soviet offensive. They became much more aware of it on 18 January, when their defense began to disintegrate, with German troops falling back to avoid encirclement and destruction. Hitler demanded that the troops stand their ground to the death, but few were willing to die for such fantasies.

The German garrison of Novgorod got permission to withdraw only at the last moment, pulling out on the night of 19 January, with the Red Army moving in the next morning, the 20th. They found the city completely ruined. The Germans had actually been demolishing classic Russian buildings there for some time, on the policy that the place was to be handed over to German settlers and built into a German city.

Kuechler and Lindemann now knew there was nothing to do but pull back to the Panther Position. Hitler refused to authorize the withdrawal and told the generals to fight harder, but the 18th Army was on the run whether he liked it or not. On the evening of 27 January 1944, Soviet authorities made a public announcement to the citizens of Leningrad that the city was now out of reach of the longest-range German guns. The 900-day siege of the city was broken. The city's artillery batteries fired 20 volleys to celebrate.

* Kuechler was not in any mood to celebrate. He was doing what he could to resist the Red Army juggernaut, but it was hopeless and he knew it. Hitler summoned him to the Wolf's Lair on 31 January and sacked him, replacing him with Walter Model. The troops had noticed the Fuehrer's inclination to call in the trustworthy Model when things were going badly, and so had nicknamed him the "Catastrophe General".

Model managed to sell the Fuehrer on a concept called "Schild und Schwert (Shield and Sword)", which was a philosophy of performing controlled retreats to put German forces in positions where they could perform counterstrokes and regain the ground they had lost. This may have merely been a smoke-and-mirrors way of selling a retreat, but the Fuehrer approved. Model pulled his forces back gradually, sometimes so slowly that even Hitler nervously told him to

hurry up, and by the beginning of March 1944 the survivors were all more or less safe and snug in the Panther Position, short three divisions that had been chewed up in the previous weeks. The spring thaw put an end to further Soviet offensive operations for the moment.

[12.2] THE THREE BLOWS: THE BATTLE OF THE CHERKASSY POCKET

* While the siege of Leningrad was being lifted, the Red Army was conducting its second blow, an offensive against German forces in the Ukraine that was basically an extension of the fall campaign that had broken the German Dnieper line and captured Kiev.

The Germans still held the downstream portions of the Dnieper, which flowed southeast and then southwest towards the Black Sea, creating a great riverbend in which German forces might be trapped. Vatutin's First Ukrainian Front moved out on 24 December 1943, driving towards Manstein's headquarters at Vinnitsa, on the Bug River southwest of Kiev.

Manstein was not overly worried at first, since he found it hard to believe that the Red Army was in any condition to carry out another major campaign so soon after the brutal fighting of the fall. The weather to the south was also unseasonably warm, and that meant that Soviet armor would be bogged down in mud. However, Manstein was underestimating Soviet resources. On 29 December, Konev's Second Ukrainian Front jumped off on a second thrust, crossing over the Dnieper far to the southeast of Vatutin's drive. Konev's objective was Kirovograd, in the Dnieper Bend. Finally, on 10 January 1944 the Third Ukrainian Front launched a third prong of the offensive from the southern end of the Soviet line.

Manstein quickly recognized that he could not deal with combinations of forces of such magnitude. His only hope was to concentrate his own forces and try to defeat the enemy by parts, and he wanted to yield ground to Konev so he could strike hard at Vatutin, the bigger threat. Hitler contemptuously called the strategy "running away" and refused to give Manstein a free hand to deal with the crisis.

However, Manstein was correct in believing that the mild winter weather and the muddy conditions it created would bog down the Red Army. Vatutin and Konev of course realized this as well, and suggested a change in battle plan. Several corps of the German 8th Army were concentrated at Kanev, not far downstream on the Dnieper from Kiev. Vatutin's drive flanked them to the northwest while Konev's columns flanked them from the southeast, leaving the German forces sandwiched between them and obviously vulnerable to encirclement. Of course Hitler refused to authorize their withdrawal; very well, as long as they were obligingly sitting there, there was no reason not to bag them.

Red Army planners did not like to improvise, for the simple and sensible reason that Soviet forces usually lacked the flexibility and competence to pull off such improvisations. The Red Army was a powerful but blunt instrument, and though matters had greatly improved during the

years of total war, trying to finesse things, particularly in the face of the more skillful German Army, was asking for trouble. However, this was a fairly straightforward adjustment in plans and the opportunity seemed too good to pass up. Zhukov chatted with Stalin about the idea over dinner. Koba liked the idea and was agreeable.

Vatutin would turn south and Konev would turn north and the two fronts would then meet, isolating the Germans. The weather went cold, improving Soviet mobility, and on the morning of 24 January 1944 the movement began as a series of probing attacks by Vatutin's troops to test German strength. German defenses were soft, and by the end of the day the First Ukrainian Front was on the way south.

Next morning, 25 January, Konev's Second Ukrainian Front began to drive north. One German compared the onslaught to a flood, like a dam breaking, the Soviets pressing on with a complete indifference to losses, the initial attacks followed up by a huge classic horse cavalry charge. The German 8th Army commander, General Otto Woehler, asked for permission to pull out. Hitler refused. Hans Hube's 1st Panzer Army tried to hold the line, but Red armor broke through on 26 January. Hube also asked Berlin for permission to withdraw. Once again, Hitler refused.

The First and Second Ukrainian Fronts joined hands on 28 January, trapping the 11th & 42nd Corps of the German 8th Army in a pocket around the city of Cherkassy. Soviet intelligence estimated that the Red Army had bagged 85,000 Germans, but that was a gross exaggeration. Military units that have been suffering losses over time that cannot be made good naturally tend to shrink, and there is a certain reluctance, due to a desire to keep up an appearance of strength plus simple inertia, to consolidate depleted units. There were actually only about 56,000 Germans trapped in the Cherkassy Pocket.

The Soviet hold on the pocket was not very strong and the Germans would only have to punch through about 40 kilometers (25 miles) of Soviet-held territory to break out. Hitler refused to authorize a breakout, reasoning that if it was relatively easy to break out, then it would be about as easy to mount a relief effort. The Fuehrer authorized Manstein to organize a relief column, and on the morning of 4 February 1944 the German 3rd Panzer Corps and 47th Corps moved out. They made good progress at first, but the weather had gone warm again and by the next day, 5 February, the Germans were bogged down. The 47th Corps was forced to call it quits on 6 February. It was obvious that the relief column would not make to the pocket. Woehler sent a courier to plead for authorization of a breakout. Hitler thought it over for twelve hours and then grudgingly approved.

The two German corps in the pocket were now under the unified command of Lieutenant General Wilhelm Stemmermann, previously commander of 11 Corps. On 11 February, the 3rd Panzer Corps managed to grab the village of Lysyanka, blocked from a linkup with the forces trapped in the pocket by the Gniloi Tikich River and tough Soviet defenses. Stemmermann's troops moved out just before midnight in their first breakout attempt, but they were quickly halted by Red Army counterattacks.

Mud and rain stalled the fighting for a few more days, but on 14 February the 1st Panzer Division of the 3rd Panzer Corps managed to capture a bridge over the Gniloi Tikich. The major

obstacle left to completing the breakout was a prominent high point over the terrain named "Hill 239", defended to the teeth by Red Army tanks and artillery. The Germans attacked Hill 239 in a blinding blizzard and a nasty fight followed.

Manstein saw that he was not likely to win the fight. On 15 February, he told Stemmermann that his forces would have to complete the breakout themselves. Stemmermann replied that he would begin his breakout at 11:00 PM on 16 February. The Red Army was pressing him heavily and sending appeals from captured German generals to persuade him to surrender, but Stemmermann managed to hold out while he rearranged his forces for the escape. The blizzard ended on the morning of 16 February and the 1st Panzer Division renewed its push on Hill 239, even getting three tanks on top of the hill for a short time; but that was as far as the relief effort got. The rest was up to Stemmermann and the 45,000 troops in the pocket that had survived the fighting so far.

By nightfall, final preparations were being put in place for the breakout, with a timetable in place and orders handed down the ranks. There were about 1,500 men who were too badly wounded to join the breakout and had to be left behind. The action began precisely on schedule at 11:00 PM that night. Three infantry regiments led the way, moving out as quietly as possible and relying on the bayonet. Although the Soviets should have been expecting something like this, they were taken by surprise, and the breakout effort went surprisingly well. One infantry regiment ran into four Soviet tanks and a column of trucks, but a German soldier coolly ordered the tanks to halt in Russian. They did so and the Germans marched past unhindered.

Other German units were not so lucky, some being forced to swim the frigid and fast-moving Gniloi Tikich, with many men drowning or dying of exposure. Of course, by the time the sun came up on the morning of 17 February the Red Army was fully alert, aware of what was going on, and doing their best to catch the fleeing Germans, who were bogged down by the mud. While the German troops dodged artillery and machine-gun fire, Soviet tanks raced after German vehicles and carts and simply ran them down, crushing soldiers under their tracks.

It was every man for himself, which under the circumstances was likely the only sensible policy. Since the fighting was concentrated around Hill 239, the escaping Germans went south and tried to swim the Gniloi Tikich. The water was no more pleasant in the day than it had been in the night, and to compound the misery of the situation Soviet tanks took the troops under fire as they tried to cross. The river was littered with bodies floating downstream among the ice floes.

By the time the action faded out that afternoon, about 30,000 German troops had managed to escape to safety, a surprisingly large number given the desperate circumstances. Stemmermann was not among the survivors. He had been one of the last to leave the pocket, remaining behind to get everyone on their way and ensure that anything left behind was destroyed. A soldier reported that he had given Stemmermann a ride on his wagon, which had then been hit by a shell from a Soviet antitank gun.

* The large number of survivors gratified Manstein, though they were absolutely no good to him as fighting men. They had lost all of their heavy equipment -- in fact, many had lost the clothes off their backs -- and their wretched condition shocked other German soldiers, who were

themselves accustomed to living conditions that were normally much less than comfortable. Manstein was forced to send the survivors to Poland to recuperate.

Worse, in being forced to focus on relief of the Cherkassy Pocket, Manstein had pulled forces from other sections of his line, and the Red Army had of course exploited German weakness elsewhere. Soviet forces were pressing him heavily on his flanks, as well as threatening Kleist's Army Group A on the southern end of the German line. The only relief was that the muddy season was now in effect with a vengeance, rendering serious military operations impossible for a few weeks.

Manstein, Kleist, and Zeitzler wanted to use the breather to pull back behind the Bug River and set up a new and hopefully solid defensive line. Hitler, still obsessed with holding onto ground at all costs, had a different idea. In early March 1944, he issued orders indicating that 26 cities and major towns in German-occupied Soviet territory were to be set up as "fortified places" and held to the last. Troops assigned to the garrisons of these fortified places knew perfectly well they were unlikely to leave them alive.

In the meantime, the Red Army resupplied, refitted, and regrouped for the next phase of the push. The only real setback they suffered during this time occurred on 29 February, when anti-Soviet Ukrainian partisan fighters jumped Vatutin's car and seriously wounded him. He would die in six weeks and be buried with military honors in Kiev. Zhukov replaced him in command of the First Ukrainian Front.

The Soviet offensive restarted on 4 March, with the First, Second, and Third Ukrainian Fronts rolling forward like a tidal wave. They quickly crossed over the Bug and reached the next river line, the Dniester, on 22 March. Hitler was being as stubborn as ever about withdrawals, but on 26 March Kleist of Army Group A, knowing perfectly well he was making a career decision, ordered the 8th Army to fall back on his own authority. Hitler did not countermand the order, but he was far from happy with it.

To the south, Zhukov's armor had already trapped Hube's First Panzer Army. On 25 March, Manstein flew to meet the Fuehrer at the Berghof, Hitler's resort in the Bavarian Alps near the town of Berchtesgaden, and pleaded the case for withdrawal. Hitler did not like the request, accusing Manstein of being a retreating general -- but the Fuehrer thought it over for a while and then not only authorized the breakout but also ordered two SS divisions sent east as reinforcements to help it along. Hitler still had his moments of lucidity.

Manstein flew back to his headquarters in Lvov the next day, 26 March 1944, the same day that Konev's tanks reached the Rumanian border, on the Prut River in front of the Carpathian Mountains. Not only had the Red Army finally achieved a handhold on the border from which it had been thrown back so painfully almost three years before, but the Rumanians had little fight left in them and the country's leadership was clearly moving towards an accommodation with the USSR. Massive artillery salutes were fired in Moscow that evening in celebration.

* None of the Germans were doing any celebrating, least of all Hitler. On 30 March his personal FW-200 Condor transport flew to Tiraspol to pick up Kleist, then to Lvov to pick up Manstein,

and flew them to meet with the Fuehrer. The two generals almost certainly knew what was going to happen to them. Hitler gave them awards, praised their diligence, and then sacked them. Manstein was replaced by Walter Model and Kleist was replaced by Ferdinand Schoerner, a general who was imperious even by the standards of the German senior officer caste. Model's Army Group South became "Army Group North Ukraine" and Schoerner's Army Group A becoming Army "Group South Ukraine".

All this command reshuffling was of little help to Hube and his trapped 1st Panzer Army. Zhukov was doing his best to send in more armor and prevent a breakout, and Luftwaffe airlifts to the 1st Panzer were not adequate to counter growing Soviet strength. However, on 31 March the area was hit by a blizzard that lasted three days. The snow bogged down Red Army tanks, but the Luftwaffe kept flying and gave Hube enough material to greatly improve his chances for a successful breakout. The two SS divisions promised as reinforcements for the breakout also arrived by rail during the storm.

On 2 April, while the snow continued to fall, Hube consolidated bridgeheads for the breakout, and when the snow stopped Zhukov couldn't rush in armor fast enough to counter the move. In the meantime, the Luftwaffe was doing a heroic job of bringing in supplies. On the morning of 5 April, the two SS divisions attacked, and in two days of fighting managed to open up a corridor to the 1st Panzer Army. Supplies were brought in while Hube's men got out, and within a week the Germans had slipped the trap.

It was a bright point in what otherwise amounted to a dismal season for the German Army. Even Model, not a person given to doubts about himself, must have had worries about taking command of armies that had been thrashed, thrown back, and reduced to miserable condition, with little in the way of proper supplies and food. Hube was properly honored for his achievement, with Hitler awarding him medals at the Berghof on 20 April. However, while Hube was flying back to the front the next day, 21 April, his pilot flew into a mountain in the Austrian Alps, with everyone on board killed. At least Hube ended his career on a high note.

[12.3] THE THREE BLOWS: THE RECONQUEST OF THE CRIMEA

* The third of the three blows was the Soviet reconquest of the Crimea. There had been a debate in the Soviet high command over the need for the operation, with one faction arguing that it would be most sensible just to seal it off and let the Germans hang on it to no good effect; while another faction argued that as long as the Germans remained there, they would be a nuisance. The advocates of action won out, possibly less because of the logical merits of their argument than because of the need to avenge the humiliation over the loss of the Crimea in the first place.

In the first half of November, the Fourth Ukrainian Front under General Tolbukin cut off the land bridge from the Crimea to the mainland in the north, while the Fourth Maritime Army under Lieutenant General Ivan Y. Petrov, who had been the commander at Sevastopol before its

capture by the Germans, established a beachhead on the peninsula on the west side of the Kerch Strait.

The operation to reconquer the Crimea was assigned to Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, who had been shelved since late 1941. Exactly what Stalin was thinking is difficult to understand -- or at least more difficult than normal -- since Voroshilov was a pleasant and sociable fellow who liked the arts and the good life, but lacked any serious focus on military affairs. Stalin at least assigned the chief of operations of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Sergei Shtemenko, as his advisor.

On their arrival in the battle theater, Voroshilov and Shtemenko spoke with Petrov, and all three agreed that Petrov's beachhead on the peninsula needed to be expanded with a second landing. This implied a cooperative effort between the ground, air, and sea elements of the Soviet military machine. Such coordination between services would be tricky for any nation's military forces, and it was particularly tricky for the ham-fisted Soviet war machine.

In any case, Voroshilov lacked the drive or capability to give the matter proper direction. He simply called the relevant senior officers together and let them hash it out, and when they came up with a compromise plan he wrote it up and everyone signed it. The landing went forward about six weeks later, on 10 January 1944, and was a complete fiasco. The Germans hammered the troops on the landing beaches, and the force had to be withdrawn after two days of one-sided fighting due to a simple lack of ammunition.

The wheels turned back at the Kremlin, and on 3 February General Andrei Yeremenko, previously the senior commander for the defense of Stalingrad, showed up unannounced to summarily relieve Petrov. Petrov and Shtemenko were ordered to Moscow, where they found Stalin in an unpleasant mood. Koba was particularly annoyed with the committee approach to decision making and gave Shtemenko a sarcastic chewing-out: "Like some collective farm! You didn't hold a vote on it, by any chance? Voroshilov can be forgiven for a thing like that -- he's not a staff officer. But you should have known how things were done."

Shtemenko returned south but Petrov was sidelined for the moment, while the command arrangements in the south were rearranged to ensure that Voroshilov could do no more damage. However, further plans for the reconquest of the Crimea remained stalled.

* Despite the fact that the Red Army was not doing much to inconvenience German forces in the Crimea for the moment, the German military command knew that the forces there had to be withdrawn. The peninsula was being held by the German 17th Army, with about 90,000 German troops and 60,000 Rumanian troops under Colonel-General Erwin Jaenecke. His forces were obviously greatly outnumbered by the Red Army elements in the region, all the more so because the Rumanians were so notoriously unreliable in combat. In addition, as mentioned, his forces were serving no particularly useful military purpose bottled up in the Crimea; they might as well have all been in a prison camp.

Jaenecke, Kleist, and chief of staff Zeitzler all wanted to pull the 17th Army out of the Crimea by sea, but Hitler was in his usual form: no retreats. After Kleist was sacked, in early April his

replacement, General Schoerner, performed an inspection of the defenses in the Crimea, and stated that they could be held for a long time.

That all depended on the definition of the phrase "a long time". By coincidence, the Red Army had ended its dithering and was now ready to deal with the German forces there in earnest. On 8 April, Tolbukhin's Fourth Ukrainian Front smashed into the northern German defenses in the Crimea, cracking them after a day's fighting. Hitler was furious.

On 11 April, Yeremenko moved west with his Independent Maritime Army. The Germans and Rumanians tried to make a stand at the intermediate "Gneisenau Line", but they were confronted by almost half a million Soviet troops on a roll, and the Gneisenau Line was cracked in turn on 12 April, with the survivors falling back to the Sevastopol defenses. Schoerner saw no alternative but to evacuate the 17th Army by sea, but Hitler, who had been wavering, went stubborn again and refused to authorize yet another retreat.

Despite interference from the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, there was no reason the evacuation couldn't be pulled off, since the Red Army was something of a victim of its own success, so far ahead of schedule that the last half of April had to be spent resupplying and regrouping. Late in April, Jaenecke went to the Berghof to speak with Hitler, and the Fuehrer promised him reinforcements. Jaenecke was outraged to find out presently that the reinforcements consisted of a small handful of green recruits. He protested bitterly and Hitler sacked him, replacing him with General Karl Allmendinger, a 17th Army corps commander. Allmendinger must have found this a questionable honor, since the 17th Army was in a very difficult position. The Sevastopol defenses were well-sited on rugged terrain, but Allmendinger lacked the manpower and material to adequately hold them.

On 5 May 1944, the Soviets began their assault with the Second Guards Army on the northern end of the German line, where the terrain was most favorable to the offense. However, this was just a feint, intended to draw off the defenders. On 7 April, the Fifty-First Army and the Maritime Army launched a heavy assault from the southeast that quickly penetrated German lines. By the evening of the next day, 8 April, the Red Army had seized the harbor. Hitler finally ordered an evacuation.

Although there were plenty of ships available, for whatever reasons the crews were less than energetic in their attempts to pick up the troops, and in fact some of the ships went back empty. In any case, only a fraction of the soldiers managed to escape over the next four days. When the fighting finally came to a stop, the Red Army snatched up over 26,000 prisoners and captured vast quantities of equipment. The humiliation of the loss of the Crimea to the Fascists had been suitably avenged. The ugly fiasco led to recriminations in Berlin. Jaenecke and Allmendinger were sidelined for the rest of the war.

* The Three Blows had shoved back the Germans to the borders of the Soviet Union, north and south. Only Army Group Center still held out, standing its ground in Belorussia, and that was only because the Red Army had not turned its attention there yet. Army Group Center would have its turn soon enough.

[12.4] STALIN'S TERROR RETURNS

* The Red Army had reclaimed much of the territory lost to the Germans, but for the people living in those regions the return of Soviet power was by no means a liberation. Stalin was crafty in some ways; perfectly mad in others; and to him the fact that these people had been under German occupation made them objects not of sympathy but of suspicion. Stalin's paranoia of the liberated peoples saw them as a class, and so they would suffer for it as a class. Entire populations were uprooted from their homes and sent to remote regions. Stalin had experimented with these mass deportations before the war, and now he was returning to the concept with a literal vengeance.

The peoples of the northern Caucasus -- the Ingushi, Balgars, and Chechens -- were among the first to feel Stalin's boot. Few of these people had felt any real loyalty to the USSR in the first place, and when the Nazis arrived on their short-lived excursion towards the mountains, some of the locals undoubtedly collaborated. However, in Stalin's eyes, they were all equally guilty, and he imposed his punishment: punitive deportation of entire ethnic groups.

When the Red Army came back in the wake of the fleeing Germans, it was followed by NKVD units that rounded up the local peoples in predawn raids. The Chechens were particular targets of NKVD wrath, with at least half a million deported. The able-bodied menfolk were rounded up first, sent to holding camps under armed guard, and then sent to remote republics. Then the women and children and old folk were rounded up separately and packed off in their turn, often to entirely different republics. The Kalmyks, a semi-nomadic Mongol people who lived in the region south of Stalingrad, were given the same treatment. Even Kalmyk soldiers who were home recuperating from wounds suffered at the front were deported.

Conditions of the deportations were primitive and many died, possibly as many as a third, with the deportations proving particularly harsh on the very young and very old. Families were reunited eventually, but sometimes only after a year or more as the clumsy Soviet bureaucracy ground through its motions. Back in their homelands, only ghost towns remained.

When the Germans were driven out of the Crimea in May 1944, Stalin turned his eye on the Crimean Tartars and deported 400,000 of them. This required a great deal of transport, which had to be robbed from the Red Army which needed it for its operations, and large numbers of NKVD personnel. Stalin's vengeance took priority. Stalin apparently wanted to deport all the Ukrainians, too, but concluded there were simply too many of them.

* The fighting on the front remained intense, drawing everyone's attention, and outsiders knew little or nothing of these barbarities. While the Soviet Union had great resources of its own, Western assistance remained valuable. Aircraft flew in across Siberia, or from Iran. American and British merchant vessels ran the German gauntlet to deliver their much-needed cargoes to Murmansk or Archangel in the north. The sailors believed they were allies with the Russian people and their Great Leader in the war with the devil Hitler. They did not realize that Stalin regarded them fundamentally as enemies, as he regarded anyone who was outside of his control.

Churchill, who never had many illusions about Stalin, understood this perfectly: "The Soviets fear our friendship more than they fear our enmity." Churchill might not have known that Stalin commented more than once that together the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany would have been "invincible", but he not have been surprised; when Churchill was once told before the war that Communism and Naziism were worlds apart, he replied that the same could be said of the North and South Poles. Both Stalin and Hitler regarded cruelty not as a vice, not even an ugly necessity demanded by circumstances, but as a virtue. Both saw democracies as weak and contemptible. To Stalin, his allies were totally alien, and so deeply suspect.

A Russian teenage girl, Valentina Ivleva, watched the convoys come in and met an American junior officer, Bill Rowe. They fell in love, but they were separated when the convoy departed, with Rowe hoping that God would provide for them both. Once the convoy left, the arrests began. In 1946, it would be Valentina Ivleva's turn. She was accused of being a spy. She thought it was a misunderstanding. It was not. A possibility of guilt was the same as guilt in Stalin's Soviet Union. She spent six years of misery in the Gulag.

Hitler's atrocities masked Stalin's, even though the full extent of Nazi brutality manifested in the great extermination camps remained hidden for the moment. As German soldiers pulled out in the face of the Red Army, they destroyed everything behind them, leaving little but scorched earth. They killed civilians indiscriminately. Survivors even told of mothers killing their own children, to spare them the worse brutalities of the Germans and to deny the Germans the pleasure of killing them.

Soviet moviemmen filmed the survivors and recorded their brutal stories. If Stalin wanted propoganda to cover his own trail of cruelty, Hitler was giving him all he needed. There was no need to lie or exaggerate. The truth was almost too savage to be believed.

[13.0] Driving Out The Fascists

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* By the spring of 1944, the German-held portion of the Soviet Union had been reduced to Belorussia. Of course, driving the Fascist enemy completely out of the Motherland was at the top of the Stalin's agenda, resulting in yet another monster Red Army offensive, Operation BAGRATION. With Soviet power becoming increasingly overwhelming, Stalin's arrogance began to reassert itself, and the strains in the alliance between East and West became increasingly apparent -- most obviously in the summer of 1944, when the Polish underground rose up against the Germans, and the Red Army indifferently stood by while the uprising was crushed.

[13.1] OPERATION BAGRATION / THE LIBERATION OF FRANCE

* In the spring of 1944, a simple look at the battle lines in the East on a map would have suggested that the German Army Group Center, occupying what amounted to a huge salient in Belorussia, was the likely next target of the Red Army. However, German intelligence suggested that the Soviets were most likely to push in the south. Stalin had always had ambitions in the Balkans, and the conquest of Hungary, Rumania, and Bulgaria would knock three German allies out of the war, and most importantly cut off oil supplies to the Reich. The Red Army could then advance into Germany up the Danube valley.

Hitler believed the intelligence and looted Army Group Center of men and material to brace up the shaky line to the south. Army Group Center's commander, Field Marshal Ernst Busch, was in no good position to complain and went along with the transfers, which eventually reduced his command to 400,000 men, a shadow of its peak strength of a million.

German intelligence was wrong. Stalin clearly understood the benefits of a Balkan strategy, but eliminating the "Belorussian Bulge" had plenty of attractions of its own. The Germans in the bulge threatened the flanks of Red Army movements to the north and south, while the salient was vulnerable to being cut off and wiped out. There was also the emotional issue that Belorussia was the last major chunk of Soviet territory in German hands.

Preparations for an offensive into Belorussia, codenamed Operation BAGRATION after Prince Bagration, a hero of the Napoleonic Wars and not incidentally of Georgian origin, began in April 1944. Stalin was still a bit uncertain about ignoring the Balkans, fearing that the British and Americans meant to double-cross him and actually open up their second front there, blocking Soviet expansion in the region. In fact, the Rumanians, who were fed up with the Germans but distrusted the Soviets, had been making overtures to the Western Allies for a separate surrender. The exercise went nowhere, and Stalin's foreign intelligence service made it clear that the Western Allies were preparing to keep their word given at Tehran to invade France in the spring of 1944. Stalin grew less and less worried about being beaten to the Balkans.

BAGRATION was under the direction of Marshals Vasilevsky and Zhukov, who gradually accumulated a massive, well-equipped army. By the end of May, German intelligence finally began to sense that the Soviets were building up forces around Army Group Center. Busch was worried, but Hitler shrugged it off, possibly in wishful thinking, as yet another Soviet deception, designed to conceal Stalin's true intentions to the south and pin down Army Group Center.

Hitler soon had other things to worry about. On 6 June 1944, the Western Allies landed at Normandy. Stalin now had his second front, and any lingering concerns he had about an Anglo-American invasion of the Balkans evaporated. Although the Germans would continue to keep the bulk of their forces in the East, with Allied armies advancing on two sides Hitler's Reich was in a

vise that would soon exert crushing pressure and strain the faltering German war machine past its limits.

By mid-June, the last pieces for BAGRATION were being put into place. 2.5 million men were committed to the offensive, along with 5,200 tanks and assault guns, 7,000 aircraft, and 31,000 guns and heavy mortars. In response to the German Tiger and Panther tanks, Soviet industry had pumped great effort into building improved armor:

- The "SU-85", a long-barreled high-velocity 85 millimeter antiaircraft gun mounted on a T-34 chassis, developed on a fast track as a stopgap weapon.
- A new model of the T-34 "up-gunned" from its original short-barreled 76 millimeter gun to the same 85 millimeter gun.
- The "SU-100", an update of the SU-85 with a lethal long-range 100 millimeter gun.
- The formidable "Josef Stalin II" tank, the successor to the KV series and armed with a heavy 122 millimeter artillery gun.

Huge stockpiles of food, supplies, and ammunition were accumulated, and an enormous fleet of trucks, many of them the excellent American 6x6, was assembled to haul the material to the troops. Four Red Army fronts would participate in the attack:

- The First Baltic Front under General Ivan Bagramyan, in position to the north of the Belorussian Bulge.
- The Third Belorussian Front under Lieutenant General Ivan Chernyakhovsky, in position to the northeast.
- The Second Belorussian Front under General Matvei Zakharov, in position to the center.
- The First Belorussian Front under Marshal Rokossovsky, in position to the southeast and south.

The plan was straightforward in overall concept, with the Red Army advancing in two huge pinchers that would converge on Minsk, trapping whatever was left of Army Group Center that hadn't been smashed by the initial onslaught.

authorize the withdrawal. However, Hitler fidgeted over the matter for several hours and finally authorized a withdrawal that evening, though he insisted that one division remain behind to fight to the last. It was too late. The 53rd Corps was completely encircled, and the Red Army hammered it to pieces for three days, smashing desperate German attempts to break out. The corps commander, Major General Friedrich Gollwitzer, finally ran up the white flag.

While the 53rd Corps was being crushed, Hitler fussed over obedience to the letter of his orders, and on 25 June he passed an order down through Busch to Reinhardt to drop a staff officer by parachute into Vitebsk with written instructions emphasizing what they were to do. Busch was shocked when Reinhardt bluntly refused to do it. Why waste a single further life for such a foolish matter? Busch pressed Reinhardt on the matter, and Reinhardt, who must have had a spine of tungsten steel, replied that if Hitler really insisted, he, Reinhardt, would go himself. The Fuehrer backed down.

* This little farce took place against a backdrop of total disaster all up and down the line. In the center, General Kurt von Tippelskirch's 4th Army was being torn to pieces, having lost two full divisions in a futile attempt to hold the fortified towns of Orsha and Mogilev. His forces were mercilessly harassed by Red Air Force Sturmoviks and other attack aircraft of General K.A. Vershin's Fourth Air Army, which claimed the destruction of over 3,000 German vehicles.

Tippelskirch sent an order down to a reserve panzer grenadier division to move out and "plug the hole east of Mogilev". The division commander, a Major General von Steinkeller, reported to his corps commander, a General Martinek, who told him sarcastically: "Precisely what hole are you supposed to stop? We've got nothing but holes here. Your place is back on the Berezina River, so that we can have an interception line when we can't hold onto the Dnieper any longer. And that will be pretty soon."

Rokossovsky's assault, the last of the three to go forward, was proving just as brutally successful as the others. His forces drove forward on a two-pronged pincher movement, a scheme which he had sold to Stalin by being persistent when everyone else told him not to dare disagree with Koba. This took a lot of conviction, since Rokossovsky, unlike some other generals such as Zhukov, had personal experience of what it was like to be worked over by Beria's thugs.

The attack was meticulously planned and went off perfectly, smashing into the German 9th Army under General Hans Jordan. On 27 June the pinchers closed, trapping 100,000 Germans around Bobriusk, another one of the fortified places. The 20th Panzer Division managed to punch a hole through the encirclement on 29 June and 30,000 Germans managed to slip out of the trap. By the end of the day the Red Army had wiped out the rest of the pocket, capturing 20,000 Germans. The other 50,000 were all dead. Rokossovsky later described the pocket as a "huge graveyard strewn with mauled bodies and mangled machines."

In four days the Red Army had overrun four fortified towns, demonstrating the foolishness of the concept. The strongholds had possibly inconvenienced the Soviets by forcing them to expend the time, ammunition, and resources to wipe them out, but it was a much more straightforward exercise to smash an enemy who just sat there waiting to be encircled and destroyed than to bag

one that was in motion, falling back in the face of blows and striking out when an opportunity presented itself.

Hitler knew that if he kept yielding ground sooner or later the Red Army would march into Berlin, but he failed to understand that he was accelerating the process, not delaying it. On 28 June, the Fuehrer had attempted to repair the damage in his own style by sacking General Jordan and handing his 9th Army over to General Nikolaus von Vormann, and then sacking Field Marshal Busch and assigning command of Army Group Center to, of course, Walter Model. Model also retained command of Army Group North Ukraine and promptly transferred divisions from there to try to brace up the defense in the center.

The Catastrophe General knew perfectly well how desperate the situation was, but the Fuehrer would not give him freedom of movement either, insisting that Army Group Center hold a line on the Berezina River, about 95 kilometers (60 miles) to the east of Minsk. It was a fantasy, since many German units had already fallen back well to the west of the Berezina, and German communications, organization, and logistics in the region had effectively broken down.

The Red Army was converging relentlessly on Minsk in their planned pincher movement. Once the pinchers closed, all the Germans to the east would be doomed. Soviet troops were determined and moving quickly. Hundreds of thousands of Belorussians had been slaughtered and countless villages had been razed by SS Einsatzgruppen during the Nazi occupation, and when Soviet soldiers saw what had been done there, they were filled with anger and hatred. Many German soldiers, demoralized and without leadership, surrendered in numbers to Soviet forces, even though Red Army troops had shown a strong inclination to kill Germans who tried to surrender. Other Germans frantically raced west to escape the trap. When their vehicles became bogged down in traffic jams, the soldiers got out and continued their retreat on foot.

Chernyakhovsky's Third Belorussian Front and Rokossovsky's First Belorussian Front finally met up on 3 July 1944. The ring was closed. The triumphant Red Army forces then prepared to move into Lithuania to the north and into Poland to the west, while such German resistance as still persisted was mopped up.

* The mopping-up operation was complete by 11 July. 28 German divisions had been destroyed during BAGRATION, with over 300,000 German soldiers killed or captured. The total included most of the 30,000 that had escaped the trap at Bobriusk, only to find themselves in a bigger trap. Red Army soldiers who had survived long enough to remember the ghastly encirclements of 1941 could take satisfaction in handing back to the Germans what the Soviets had suffered a few years earlier.

On 17 July, 50,000 German prisoners were paraded through Moscow on their way to labor camps as a propaganda exercise. Some Western journalists had suggested that the Germans had withdrawn most of their troops from Belorussia before the beginning of BAGRATION, and Stalin wanted to prove that Hitler hadn't been that sensible. The prisoners were watched by crowds that remained silent -- whether as a measure of contempt or out of an inability to further mock the pathetically humbled is hard to say. The march was filmed from a special press truck. Street-cleaning trucks followed the parade, symbolically cleaning away the stain of their passage.

The prisoners would not find their captivity pleasant, but unlike the unfortunates taken earlier in the war, most would survive their imprisonment. The wheels of the Soviet apparatus had turned and they would at least be given the minimal necessities needed to stay alive. It was more than what the Germans had ever done for Soviet prisoners.

* Any person with sense knew that final defeat in the East was now only a matter of time. Hitler, never the most balanced of men, sank into delusion, grasping at phantom opportunities for victories. He was struck a further, devastating blow on 20 July 1944 when members of the German officer corps attempted to assassinate him with a bomb, failing only by a freak stroke of luck that saved Hitler while four others in the room were killed. He took his vengeance on the plotters and anyone he suspected, with the Gestapo arresting them, torturing them, and then brutally executing them after brief show trials. Hitler watched movies of the executions.

Field Marshall Erwin Rommel was implicated in the plot. Admitting that such a great hero of the German people could have schemed to kill the Fuehrer would be a humiliation, so Rommel was ordered to take poison and then given a grand state funeral, his death being reported as due to natural causes. The Kremlin said little about the matter. An attempt to assassinate a tyrannical dictator, even one who was an enemy, may have made Josef Stalin uneasy.

Hitler had to take pleasure in the executions because there was nothing else to make him happy at the time. BAGRATION had been yet another disaster in the East; it was quickly followed by a comparable disaster in the West in mid-August, when Allied forces broke out of the Normandy beachhead. Thanks to the Fuehrer's predictable insistence that his generals stand their ground, the Allied armies swung around the German forces resisting the invasion and crushed them.

In the meantime, on 15 August 1944, Allied forces landed in Southern France under Operation DRAGOON. The British and Americans had argued over DRAGOON up to the last minute, Churchill having characteristically preferred a landing in the Balkans -- one of the objectives of course being to curtail Soviet ambitions in that region. That was precisely one of the major reasons why the Americans didn't like the idea, Roosevelt understanding that he had no mandate from the electorate to get into a fight with the USSR. Germany was the real enemy. The American view prevailed.

While the merits and faults of DRAGOON are still debated, the end effect of the dual-pronged Allied assault on France was that the Germans were effectively run out of France as rapidly as they had conquered it in the spring of 1940. Paris fell on 25 August. By the end of August, the collapse of the Wehrmacht in France gave hopes to the Western Allies that the Reich was on its last legs, that the war would be over by Christmas. However, the momentum of the drive faltered as it stretched its thin supply lines, and as German forces fell back towards the Fatherland, they rallied and managed to stabilize a stubborn defense. Hitler had been given some breathing space, for all the good it could do him.

[13.2] OPERATION FRANTIC: THE SHUTTLE BOMBING MISSIONS

* While the Red Army was crushing German resistance in Belorussia, the Soviets and the Western Allies were engaged in a collaborative military venture that would prove less significant in terms of the damage it did to the Axis than it would in demonstrating the weaknesses of the alliance between East and West against Hitler.

After the Anglo-American invasion of southern Italy in September 1943, the Allies captured air bases there that could be used to perform bombing missions into Central Europe. There were still some targets that were out of reach, but some US Army Air Forces (USAAF) officers came up with a scheme to ensure those targets got their fair share of bombing: bases would be established on Soviet territory, allowing "shuttle bombing" missions between Italy (or England) and the Soviet bases.

In November 1943, an American military mission went to the USSR to discuss the idea, which was codenamed Operation FRANTIC. After the Tehran conference, Stalin passed down orders that six airfields should be prepared to support the effort. In February 1944, the USAAF got the bases, but it turned out only three were set up for the effort, consisting of airfields at Poltava, Mirgorod, and Piryatin, around Kiev in the Ukraine. The bases were farther from the front lines than the USAAF liked, and they were also in a poor state of repair.

All this could be chalked up to the strains of war -- *everything* in the regions the Germans had evacuated was in a poor state of repair, if it hadn't been totally demolished -- but the American officers trying to direct the effort found themselves dealing with an unfriendly and suspicious Soviet bureaucracy that raised every obstacle. Allies or not, the Americans were foreigners, and the Stalin did not like having foreigners around at all. Winston Churchill had not been very enthusiastic about FRANTIC, believing that it was placing a lot more trust on Stalin than was wise, and events were bearing him out.

However, FRANTIC went forward anyway, and the first shuttle bombing raid took place on 2 June 1944, with USAAF B-17 Flying Fortress bombers and their P-51 Mustang fighter escorts flying from Italy, raiding the railroad marshalling yards at Debreczen in Hungary, and then flying on to the Ukraine. Despite the tensions between Soviet and Russian officials over FRANTIC, the American airmen were made to feel very welcome by the Soviet personnel assigned to support them.

Once FRANTIC got rolling it seemed to go well enough, or at least it did up to the fourth raid, on 21 June, which was the first shuttle bombing mission from England. The USAAF hit synthetic oil facilities in Germany and went on to the USSR, not realizing they were being shadowed from a distance by a Luftwaffe Heinkel He-111 bomber. At midnight, the Luftwaffe hit the Poltava and Piryatin bases, dropping flares and working the airfields over for about two hours. 43 B-17s were destroyed and 26 were badly damaged; 15 P-51s were destroyed as well, along with large amounts of fuel and other supplies. American crews reported that the Soviets

failed to put up any effective resistance to the raid, and in fact the impression was that the passivity was deliberate.

In hindsight, given the occasional gross blunderings of the Soviet war machine, and the fact that in the Soviet military few dared take initiative without approval from the higher-ups, that impression might have been incorrect. Still, if it wasn't bungling, such treachery was been perfectly in character for Stalin. The shuttle bombing missions were not abandoned for the moment, but they were suspended for a month until the mess on the ground could be cleaned up and the defenses of the airbases improved.

[13.3] THE WARSAW UPRISING

* Marshal Rokossovsky's First Belorussian Front led the Soviet advance into Poland, jumping across the 1939 Soviet-Polish border on the morning of 18 July 1944, preceded by the massive artillery bombardments favored by the Red Army. The immediate objective was Lublin, about 95 kilometers (60 miles) to the west and 170 kilometers (105 miles) southeast of Warsaw. Although Hitler had designated Lublin a fortified place, the garrison only numbered about 900 men. The Red Army entered Lublin on the afternoon of 23 July and quickly captured it.

All seemed to be going to Stalin's satisfaction. Poland was not merely the road to Berlin, it was a valuable piece of property in its own right, and Stalin took steps to make sure it would remain Soviet property after the war. On 22 July, the Soviets announced the formation of the "Polish Committee of National Liberation", which became known as the "Lublin Committee". The committee was played up in propaganda broadcasts as a representative selection of free Polish leadership, but it was just a tool of the Kremlin, for example endorsing a new border that would cede large amounts of Polish territory to the USSR. The fact that the prewar Mikolajczyk government was still operating in exile in London was not much of an inconvenience; Moscow effectively ignored them.

By the end of the month, the Second and Third Ukrainian Fronts had begun a push into Rumania, the door to the Balkans, while Marshal Konev's First Ukrainian Front moved out to support Rokossovsky's First Belourussian Front along its southern flank. The move into Poland, however, was beginning to bog down as the Red Army stretched its supply lines and encountered stronger German resistance.

Soviet soldiers advancing into Poland found more ghastly evidence of German cruelty. Nazi rule had been, first to last, the very worst in Poland. The extermination of the Jewry and other "undesireables" had been mostly conducted in the six great "killing factories" the SS had established on Polish soil. On 23 July, the Red Army had captured the death camp at Majdanek, just outside Lublin. Soviet propaganda took full advantage of the opportunity to trumpet atrocities that were almost beyond imagination. For the moment, Hitler's crimes proved so monstrous that they masked suspicions in the West that Stalin was every bit as big a monster. Stalin himself would now do much to verify that all the suspicions about him were true.

* On 29 July, as the Red Army approached Warsaw, Soviet radio broadcasts issued appeals for the Poles to rise up, that the moment of liberation was at hand. Communism, the creed of the

Soviet state that most Poles regarded as a menace to their national liberty, had never been popular in Poland, and the Communist underground there was weak. The main resistance group was the Polish Home Army, the resistance arm of the Polish government in exile in London. The Home Army was led by "General Bor", the *nom de guerre* of Tadeusz Komorowski, leading a force said to be in the hundreds of thousands. The Warsaw branch of the Home Army was led by "Colonel Monter", actually Antoni Chrusciel, who led 40,000 resistance fighters. Soviet propaganda had very little good to say about the Home Army.

With Soviet tanks not far away, the Home Army wanted to be able to liberate Warsaw by themselves to make it much more difficult for Moscow to set up the stooge Lublin Committee as the government of Poland. The Home Army wasn't really strong enough to beat the heavily-armed Germans in a stand-up fight, but if the Poles could clear the enemy out of the city and then let the Red Army move in, the Germans would not have time to send in reinforcements.

Such an uprising assumed a certain cooperativeness on the part of the Red Army, and skeptics might have wondered just how sincere the Soviet radio broadcasts had been in calling for an uprising. Churchill, definitely a skeptic of the Soviets, encouraged Mikolajczyk to fly to Moscow on 31 July and try to sort things out with Stalin.

However, the Warsaw Poles did not wait on the outcome of the visit. Taking action without assurances from the Soviets was taking a big risk, but it would have been a big risk to do nothing as well, and so the order came down to rise up. The fighting was to begin at 5:00 PM on 1 August 1944, but squabbles and shooting with the Germans started after 3:00 PM. The insurgents, wearing red-and-white armbands in reflection of the colors of the Polish flag, quickly captured the center of Warsaw. Things seemed to be going well, though the Germans were able to hold their main installations, denying the insurgents supplies, weapons, and ammunition. Still, there were only about 13,000 German troops in the city and their commander, Lieutenant General Reiner Stahel, was surrounded in his own headquarters in the center of town. The Home Army fighters set up barricades in the streets to hold the ground they had taken. They were enthusiastic and excited. Pictures show pretty Polish girls carrying captured German weapons and gear, smiling broadly.

* Responsibility for fighting partisans actually fell to Heinrich Himmler and the SS. Himmler even welcomed the uprising to an extent. It would provide a pretext for the total destruction of Warsaw and teach the Poles the lesson that their national aspirations were a delusion. Inspired by this noble vision, Himmler promptly ordered that General Stefan Rowecki, General Bor's predecessor and a captive of the Germans since June 1943, be taken out and executed on 1 August.

The next day, 2 August, Himmler ordered SS General Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski to crush the uprising. Von dem Bach was far from happy with the assignment, since all he had was two battalions and a regiment of German Army troops, plus two brigades of SS troops. Both of the SS brigades were scrapings from the bottom of the barrel. The Dirlewanger Brigade was led by SS Colonel Oscar Dirlewanger, basically a drunk and a thug who had recruited criminals and other unpleasant sorts much like him from concentration and prison camps. The Kaminski

Brigade, led by Mieczyslaw Kaminski, a Soviet citizen recruited into the SS to fight partisans, was of much the same low level of quality.

Von dem Bach tried to make do with what he had. The fighting for the town went back and forth in a more or less haphazard fashion for two days, but then on 5 August the SS attacked in force, with orders passed down from Himmler to kill every Pole -- all men, the women, the children -- and to destroy everything. The Dirlewanger and Kaminski Brigades made little real progress. The Dirlewanger Brigade did follow their orders to the extent of rounding up tens of thousands of Polish civilians and shooting them, but they were not as energetic in dealing with Poles who were shooting back. The Kaminski Brigade was, blessedly, even less diligent than the Dirlewanger Brigade, with its soldiers mostly focused on loot and rape. They were stopped cold when the Poles cleverly placed a vodka distillery in their path.

Von dem Bach immediately realized that these troops were worse than useless; in fact, the Germans would become so disgusted with Kaminski's notions of soldiering that they would simply shoot him in a few weeks. For the moment, von dem Bach took the measure of passing down an order that the mindless slaughter of the defenseless was to cease. Von dem Bach was absolutely no saint, having been doing the Reich's dirty work in directing SS einsatzgruppen in the occupied regions of the USSR until the Red Army managed to encourage the Germans to leave. He gave the order at least partly to focus his force of thugs on actually fighting instead of amusing themselves with idle killing. It must have also registered in the back of his mind that the time was coming soon when Germans would have to answer for their conduct. Unfortunately, his order was often ignored.

* In the meantime, in Moscow Stalin was giving Mikolajczyk the run-around, even insisting that there was no evidence of fighting in Warsaw. The Home Army was screaming for supplies and weapons, and so on the night of 4 August the British Royal Air Force (RAF) sent 14 bombers, half of them piloted by Poles, from southern Italy to drop weapons and supplies by parachute.

The goods were delivered in three-meter (ten foot) metal cylinders and included Sten submachine guns, rifles, pistols, ammunition, and the British "Portable Infantry Anti-Tank (PIAT)" weapon. The PIAT consisted of a launcher with a big spring that fired an anti-tank bomb, and though it was a crude weapon it was particularly useful to the Home Army in close-quarters fights with German panzers. Niceties such as clothing, chocolate, cigarettes, and coffee were also crammed into the cylinders.

However, five of the bombers sent on the mission didn't come back, and the RAF decided to discontinue the supply flights. The London Poles protested loudly and the supply flights were resumed on 8 August. In the meantime, the USAAF had come up with a scheme to perform supply drops and land at the bases in the Ukraine, but when US Ambassador Averell Harriman asked Molotov for permission, Molotov flatly refused, saying that Moscow didn't want anything to do with the Warsaw "adventure". Harriman shot back that Soviet radio broadcasts had encouraged the uprising. Molotov replied in his usual bland way that he hadn't heard about any such broadcasts.

* On 12 August, von dem Bach renewed his assault on the Home Army. This time he relied on artillery, lots of it -- even using oversized siege guns designed to crush major fortifications -- supported by armor. He began to grind methodically through the areas of the city held by the insurgents, though it was slow going since some of the ancient buildings in the city were extremely solid, and Home Army resistance was very stubborn.

The fighters included teenage girls, as well as young boys who normally acted as couriers, often crawling through the sewers to reach their objectives, but who occasionally took active part in combat as well. The Home Army had little food or water and the weather was very hot. Tens of thousands of Poles had been killed, and though great efforts were made to bury them it wasn't possible to bury them all, and the air swarmed with flies that carried disease.

Von dem Bach launched a particularly heavy assault on 19 August. On 20 August Roosevelt and Churchill sent a joint appeal to Stalin to either allow the Allies to perform supply drops to the Home Army, or to provide direct assistance to the uprising. Stalin flatly refused to do anything, calling the London Poles a gang of "power-seeking criminals" who had foolishly led their people into a hopeless undertaking.

By 6 September, the Germans had surrounded and isolated the Home Army in the city. On 7 and 8 September, short truces arranged by the Red Cross took place, with von dem Bach allowing tens of thousands of civilians trapped by the fighting to leave unmolested. On 9 September, Bor sent messengers to von dem Bach to ask for terms of surrender.

Now Stalin returned to his long tradition of playing cat-and-mouse games. On 11 September he gave the Americans authorization to use the Ukraine bases for the shuttle supply flights. The next day, elements of Rokossovsky's First Belorussian Front evicted the Germans from their holdings to the east of the Vistula where it ran through Warsaw, the Germans blowing the bridges across the river behind them as they pulled out.

Soviet radio broadcasts encouraged the Home Army to fight on. Stalin also ordered airdrops of supplies to the insurgents, using the little low-and-slow Po-2 biplanes, with the cargoes simply heaved out without parachutes and smashing to the ground. On 16 September, a few companies from the First Polish Army, an element of the First Belorussian Front composed of Soviet citizens of Polish extraction and Poles who had been imprisoned after Stalin's occupation of their country, paddled across the Vistula and set up a bridgehead. They would only stay about a week and had no effect on the battle.

The American airdrop took place on 18 September, with 110 B-17s dropping a total of 1,284 supply containers. The Home Army only managed to recover 288 of them, which still gave them much more supplies than were provided by the faint-hearted Soviet airlift. The Americans would not perform another drop on Warsaw. There would be a shuttle bombing raid on the railroad marshalling yards at Szolnok in Hungary the next day, 19 September, but that would be the end of FRANTIC. Stalin refused to authorize further use of the bases, and the shrinking of the battle fronts around the Reich rendered them pointless anyway. Operation FRANTIC had not been a good use of Allied resources. The Germans judged it to be a propaganda exercise to impress the Soviets, but all it really accomplished was to make the strains in the alliance more obvious.

* The airdrop did persuade the Home Army to hang on a little longer, which in turn convinced the Germans that they had to crush the uprising once and for all. Elements of the German 9th Army began a final push against the Home Army on 24 September, crushing the Poles district by district.

On the evening of 30 September, General Bor sent an officer to von dem Bach once more to discuss terms of surrender. A cease-fire followed on the next day, 1 October. General Bor radioed London and Soviet forces across the river, saying he would try to hold out a few more days if the Red Army were willing to move into the city immediately. The message to London was relayed to the Soviet ambassador to Britain, who rejected it, and Churchill forwarded it to Moscow. There was absolutely no response from Stalin.

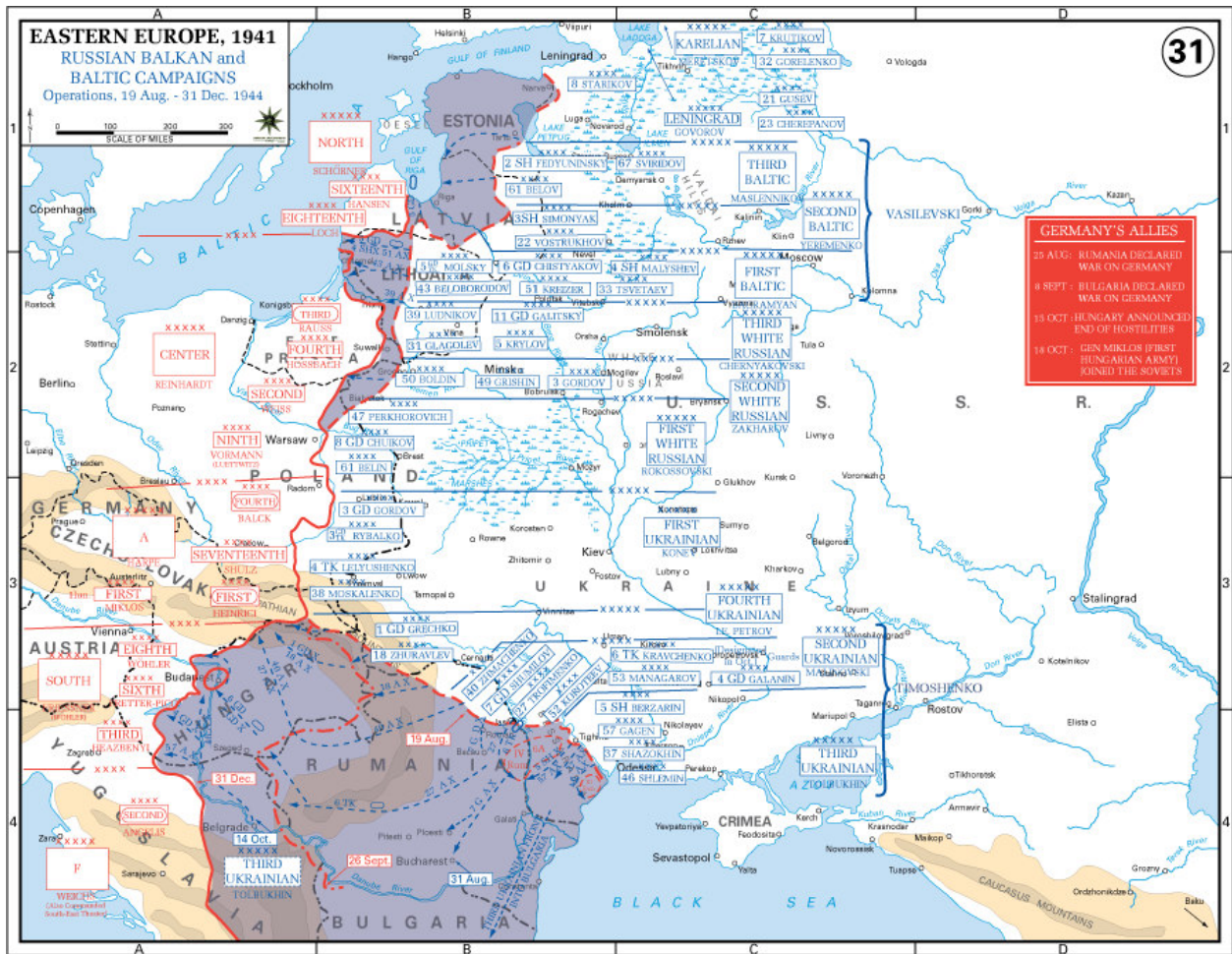
There was, however, a hasty response from von dem Bach, whose listening posts had intercepted the message. He saw every prospect that Stalin would go through one more cycle of his games and further prolong the uprising. As a result, von dem Bach was extremely reasonable when he sat down with a Home Army delegation at his headquarters on 2 October. The Poles insisted that they be treated as prisoners of war; that they would be granted amnesty for all actions against the German occupation; and that they be guarded in the prison camps by German Army troops, not SS thugs. Von dem Bach agreed to it all with little or no argument, and the surrender was signed that evening.

The Home Army surrendered the next morning, 3 October 1944. About 15,000 Poles went off to POW camps, with citizens lining the streets to watch them go. The bystanders were weeping, shouting, singing the Polish national anthem, falling to their knees. A picture survives of General Bor shaking von dem Bach's hand, Bor with his head bowed, von dem Bach looking surprisingly gracious and kindly.

In fact, von dem Bach seemed to have something of a entirely out-of-place streak of charisma for an SS general. Hitler had once commented on this, calling him "clever", or what in more modern times might be called "slick". At the surrender ceremony von dem Bach praised the "magnificent soldiers of the Home Army" and suggested the time would come when Germans and Poles would fight together against their true enemy. After the war he would be tried, but escaped the hangman by taking a very cooperative line with his captors and confessing to crimes, though almost certainly not remotely close to all of those he actually committed. He ended up with a ten-year prison sentence, and some sources claim it was suspended.

* About 200,000 Poles had died in the uprising, about a tenth of them Home Army fighters. It had not been a walkover for the Germans, who had lost about the same number of troops as the Home Army. To Stalin, it was neatly done. He had let the Germans eliminate potential opposition to his own rule over Poland, while the Poles helped exhaust the Germans in turn. The only flaw was that the veil of lies he presented to the outside world was now badly tattered.

The Red Army simply sat across the Vistula for the rest of the year while the Germans completed the demolition of Warsaw, as ordered by Himmler. When the Soviets finally entered the city in mid-January 1945, they found nothing but rubble and cinders.



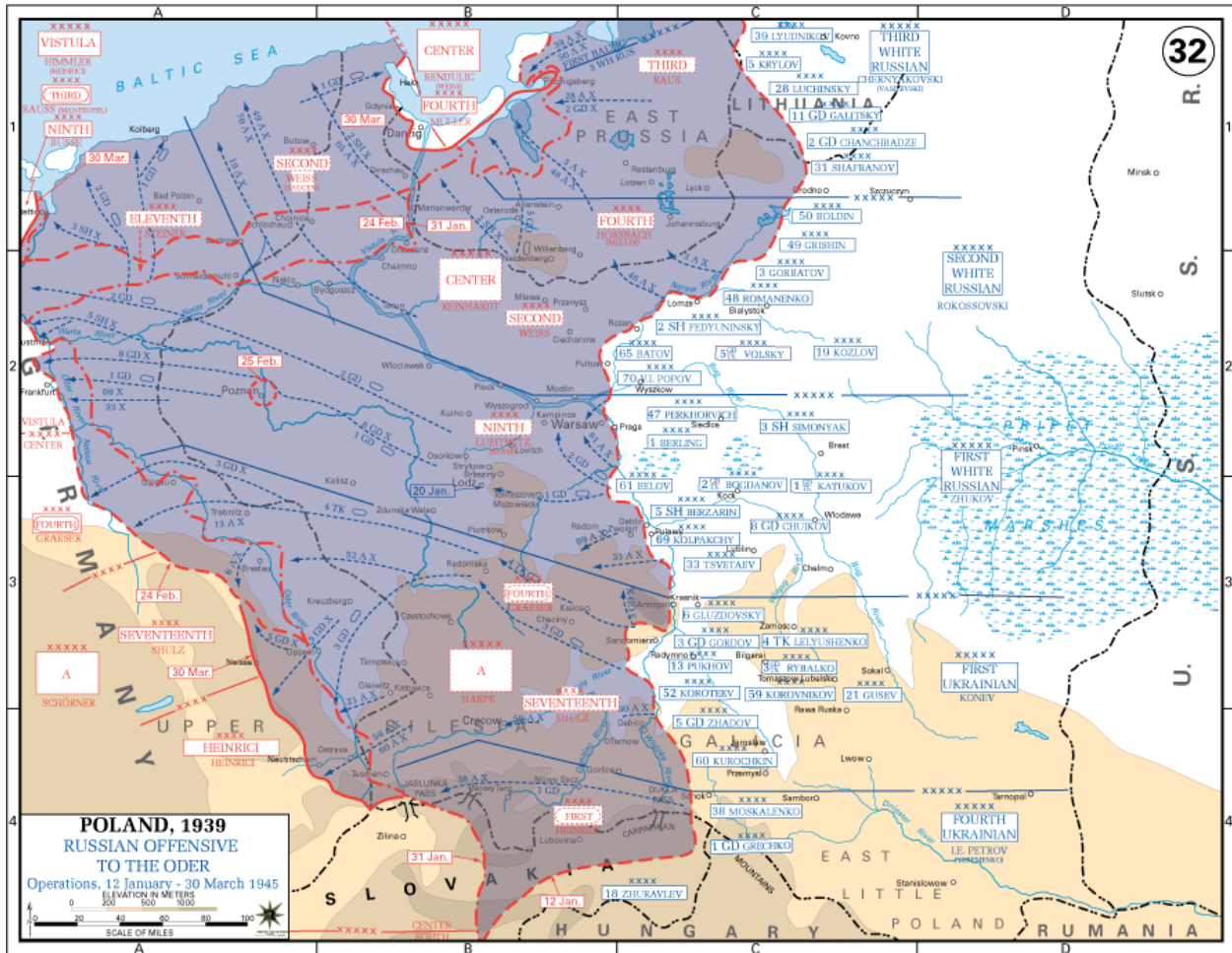
[14.0] The Hour Before Midnight

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* By early 1945, after a relatively idle fall, the Red Army was ready to begin its drive on the Reich again, pressing into western Poland, seizing East Prussia and obtaining a foothold in Pomerania. Once Soviet troops had seized German territory, German civilians suffered the full brunt of vengeance for German atrocities in the East.

With the end of the war in sight, Stalin met with Churchill and Roosevelt at Yalta in the Crimea to discuss the postwar order. There was not all that much of a discussion there: Stalin had his own ideas of what he wanted, was not inclined to make any real concessions to the Western Allies, and the meeting accomplished little other than raising suspicions of Soviet intentions. In the meantime, planning went forward for the final drive on Berlin.

[14.1] QUIET BEFORE THE STORM IN THE EAST



* While the Red Army idled on the Vistula, Soviet armored columns pushed into the Balkans. Rumania quickly surrendered, with King Michael dismissing his prime minister, surrendering to the Soviet Union, and declaring war on Germany. When Soviet forces approached Sofia in September 1944, the Bulgarian government did a similar about-face. It was an easier turnabout for the Bulgarians, since they had traditionally been friendly with the Soviets and had not participated in the invasion of the USSR.

Winston Churchill visited Moscow in October 1944. Churchill had never had many illusions about Stalin, and the tragedy of the Warsaw Uprising was no more than confirmation of what he had always believed. However, there was not much he could do to blunt Stalin's ambitions in Eastern Europe. The Red Army was there, and there was no way to change that reality.

Churchill was able to obtain a small concession. He agreed with Stalin that Bulgaria, Rumania, and Hungary would be in the Soviet sphere of influence, with the condition that the Soviets would not interfere in Greek politics. Yugoslavia was left on the table, while Stalin simply refused to discuss Poland. Britain had gone to war with Hitler over Poland, however, and the British were not about to give up on the subject.

By that time, it was clear to almost everyone that the war in Europe was entering its last stage. Sensible Germans recognized it, but whatever sensibility Hitler had was disappearing. The rational strategy for the Germans would have been to hold the line as well as they could in the East and simply wait for the British and Americans to roll up from the West, sparing Germany a degrading occupation by the loathesome Bolsheviks.

In fact, for the moment the situation in the East was stable and such a strategy was practical. Hitler hardly considered it. He intended to hold out to the bitter end, hoping for the chance that some miracle, above all a falling out between the Soviets and the Western Allies, would save the day. In hopes of such miracles, on 16 December 1944, he threw 300,000 troops against the Americans in the Ardennes Forest in Belgium and Luxembourg. The offensive achieved tactical surprise and, with Allied air power neutralized by nasty winter weather, made good progress at first. However, American resistance solidified and the offensive began to grind down, failing to reach critical objectives.

On Christmas Eve 1944, Colonel General Heinz Guderian, now head of the German Army general staff, reported to Hitler at the Fuehrer's "Adlerhorst (Eagle's Roost)" headquarters, not far from Frankfurt-on-Main. Hitler had prudently given up his Wolf's Lair headquarters in East Prussia in November. Guderian informed the Fuehrer that the Ardennes offensive had shot its bolt, and that once the weather improved and Allied reinforcements arrived, the offensive would be crushed. In the meantime, he continued, German intelligence had determined that the Red Army was engaged in an enormous buildup along the northern sectors of the Eastern Front. Guderian suggested that the Ardennes offensive be terminated immediately and the troops transferred East to meet the Soviet threat.

Hitler refused to listen to Guderian, astoundingly replying that the estimates of Soviet strength were "rubbish"; that the Red Army was actually threadbare and hardly had any tanks; that the Soviets were on the edge of collapse. Jodl backed the Fuehrer and Guderian was stymied. At dinner, Heinrich Himmler, who Hitler had just recently given a military command on the upper Rhine, told Guderian that the threat of a Soviet attack was a fraud: "It's all an enormous bluff."

Within a week, Hitler had finally admitted to his generals that the Ardennes offensive had failed, but still insisted that Germany would be able to fight on and triumph in the end. On 9 January 1945, Guderian returned from an inspection tour along the Eastern Front and informed the Fuehrer that Army Group A and Army Group Center were completely vulnerable, being badly weakened in the first place and their lines penetrated by Soviet bridgeheads where buildups were clearly being concentrated. The commanders of the groups recommended withdrawal to better defensive positions.

Hitler brushed off Guderian's concerns. Reichsmarshal Goering was there and broadly declared that most of the huge number of Soviet aircraft cited by German intelligence were merely decoys. OKW chief Keitel emphatically agreed with Goering. The Fuehrer refused to authorize a withdrawal, claiming that the current situation simply proved how foolish all the previous withdrawals had been. Hitler told Guderian that the German Army was strong and could deal with the Soviets; Guderian replied that the defense was about as sturdy as "a house of cards".

[14.2] ACROSS THE VISTULA, ON TO THE ODER

* Stalin was planning on moving very soon, having decided to jump off on 12 January 1945. His decision remains something of a lingering testimonial to Stalin's falsifications of facts. On 6 January 1945, Churchill sent him a letter to ask about Soviet offensive plans. According to persistent mythology, apparently encouraged by Soviet historians, Churchill pleaded for the Red Army to help relieve the pressure in the Ardennes, and Stalin graciously agreed to move up the start date of the assault from 20 January.

This was a bogus scenario on the face of it, since the German offensive in the Ardennes had been broken by Christmas 1944, and the only pressure the Americans and British were under was to see how many Germans they could kill or capture before the survivors made it to relative safety. The Red Army's preparations were almost complete and they could have moved even sooner than 12 January if the order were given. Churchill's letter was simply a request for information, but Stalin used it as a pretext to show how he was "rescuing" the Western Allies. Given how long Stalin had complained about the failure of the British and Americans to shoulder their share of the burden of combat, it was not surprising that Koba expressed no gratitude over the fact that his allies had effectively destroyed the last substantial combat reserves of the Wehrmacht.

In any case, the Red Army offensive would be conducted over a 480 kilometer (300 mile) wide front, with the Third Belorussian Front on the northern end of the line, skirting the shores of the Baltic; the Second Belorussian Front next; the First Belorussian Front in the center; and the First Ukrainian Front in the south.

The Third Belorussian Front was still under Chernyakhovsky, but in November Rokossovsky had been moved to command of the Second Belorussian Front, with Zhukov taking his place in charge of the First Belorussian Front. This switch meant that Rokossovsky had been moved off center stage to a supporting role, and he suspected Zhukov, who had seemed friendly to him, had engineered it. In reality Stalin himself had made the decision: Rokossovsky was half-Polish and was not entitled to top honors. The First Ukrainian Front remained under Konev. The entire operation was under the direct personal control of Stalin.

Although the weather was cold, icy, and foggy, rendering air power ineffective, the offensive went forward as Stalin promised. Indeed, the Red Army tended to like to fight in foul weather, believing with good reason that under such conditions Soviet troops had the advantage over the enemy. Before dawn on 12 January, the First Ukrainian Front began the assault from the Red Army's bridgehead across the Vistula at Sandomierz, well south of Warsaw. The attack opened with the Red Army's traditional massive artillery bombardment, which lasted for three hours. A German officer on the receiving end compared it to "the heavens falling down on earth."

When the big guns ceased, waves of armor and infantry poured forward. The Germans were caught off guard and the entire 48th Panzer Corps, consisting of three divisions, was almost completely wiped out. The 24th Panzer Corps was supposed to be operating as a reserve, but the

offensive slammed into it before a counterattack could be organized, with the Germans losing two more divisions.

To the north of Warsaw, Chernyakhovsky's Third Belorussian Front jumped off on 13 January, to be followed by Rokossovsky's Second Belorussian Front the next day, 14 January. These attacks initially bogged down in the face of stubborn German resistance, as well as marshy terrain, snowstorms, and thick fog that made fighting difficult. Zhukov was not happy with the weather, but his First Belorussian Front also went forward on 14 January, the troops encouraged by loudspeakers blasting out inspiring music. The Germans had been expecting Zhukov's attack, having observed the buildup and Red Army sappers clearing minefields, and had sensibly abandoned their front lines before the artillery barrage fell on it. It did them little good, since Zhukov's tanks and troops quickly punched through the rear defenses, driving around Warsaw and into the ruins of the city.

On 15 January, Hitler returned from the Eagle's Roost headquarters to Berlin to deal with the crisis, taking up residence in a bunker built under the Reichs Chancellery. Those around him found him sickly, far from the domineering personality he had once been, aged and seemingly senile beyond his years. His breath was very foul, which made listening to his rants at close range even more unpleasant.

The Fuehrer did little but issue useless orders and fume at the incompetence of the Wehrmacht as Soviet forces rushed forward. To spite the Army generals, on 24 January he ordered Himmler to take charge of Army Group Vistula, a newly-formed command in East Prussia made up of the remnants of units that had been chewed up on the front lines. Hitler felt that a true Nazi like Himmler would be able to accomplish the miracles that the German Army let slip from their fingers.

When Himmler arrived at Army Group Vistula, the staff he inherited found him appalling, uninspiring in manner and appearance -- if he was a Nazi superman, nobody could have told by looking him over -- and with not the least notion of how to fight a war. Himmler had of course a lot of experience in directing terror against unarmed civilians, but dealing with people who could shoot back and then some was an entirely different matter. He was oblivious to his limitations as a general and made it clear that he had no interest in taking advice from experienced professionals.

To no surprise of anyone but himself, Himmler's attempts over the next few weeks to stem the Red tide ranged from ineffectual to disastrous, though he was diligent in mouthing threats to keep the weak-willed in the fight, ordering a few executions to show the threats were serious: that was what he knew how to do, after all. He did everything he could to disguise the disastrous state of affairs at the front from the Fuehrer.

No doubt when Soviet intelligence got wind of Himmler's command, they thanked Hitler for being so helpful. One Soviet tank commander crowed: "Our tanks move faster than the trains to Berlin!" Tankers would often drive through the night, though the drivers would sometimes fall asleep and blunder into things. This usually did the tanks no great harm, but it would give the crews a nasty jolt.

* The house of cards in the East was falling down as Guderian had predicted. As he probably also could have predicted, the Fuehrer blamed everyone for the disaster, railing about the "weaklings and traitors" around him. Hitler was particularly furious when the defenders of Warsaw pulled out on 16 January, with the city was completely in Soviet hands the next day. Hitler had demanded that the city be held, even though German forces there were far too thin on the ground to have done more than inconvenienced the Red Army before being slaughtered. Hitler sacked General Joseph Harpe, commander of Army Group A, and replaced him by General Ferdinand Schoerner. Harpe might have been able to consider himself the luckier of the two.

Guderian had pleaded with the Fuehrer to transfer forces to the East, and was somewhat surprised when Hitler agreed and said that he would transfer the 6th SS Panzer Army. However, to Guderian's outrage, the Fuehrer then said that 6th SS Panzer would be sent to try to recapture oilfields near Budapest in Hungary, and not be thrown into the fight in Poland. The counteroffensive into Hungary would go ahead as ordered, and would come to nothing.

Guderian had approved the withdrawal from Warsaw and so he was the brunt of the Fuehrer's wrath. On 18 January, three of Guderian's staff officers were arrested by the Gestapo and interrogated. Guderian insisted that they had acted according to his instructions, and so he was interrogated as well.

* By 26 January, Zhukov's First Belorussian Front had isolated the fortress city of Poznan. The Wehrmacht got a short breathing spell from a blizzard on 27 and 28 January. The snow melted quickly, bogging the Soviets down in mud. The Luftwaffe, operating off of hard-surfaced runways while the Red Air Force was trapped on muddy forward airfields, obtained temporary air superiority and hammered Soviet columns for two days, flying over 5,000 sorties and inflicting major damage.

However, the Red Army had put up with worse and pushed on. By the first of February, the Red Army had bridgeheads over the Oder. Zhukov wanted to drive right on to Berlin, but the Red Army had overextended itself and was too far out on a limb with its lines of supply. German resistance had solidified on the Oder line as well. In fact, Zhukov's northern flank was dangerously exposed, and the Germans predictably took advantage of it, launching an attack with the 3rd Panzer Army in mid-February that pressed the Soviets hard for a few days until it ran out of steam. The Vistula offensive was over. Now the Red Army would regroup and resupply for the last push.

[14.3] RED VENGEANCE

* The Vistula offensive brought the war home to German citizens in full force. Masses of civilians had fled west from East Prussia and Pomerania to get away from the Red Army. Erich Koch, who retained his authority over East Prussia after the Reich had lost the Ukraine, had refused to authorize any evacuation of civilians -- but he and his cronies sensibly decided to run away themselves, giving the green light for everyone else to do the same, though since the rules

technically still applied, citizens were liable to be shot for defeatism. Fear of what Red Army troops would do to Germans made that risk worth taking.

The fears had plenty of basis in fact, since Soviet propaganda and political commissars at the rank-and-file level were hammering it into the troops that the time for revenge was near. Propagandist Ilya Ehrenberg led the charge with bloodthirsty editorials in the Red Army's newspaper, KRASNAYA ZVEZDA (RED STAR). They didn't need much encouragement, since the troops were all aware of what the Germans had done in the USSR, and many of the soldiers had personal scores to settle.

When the Red Army came upon German villages, the soldiers had a drunken party of looting, vandalism, rape, and murder. Rape was the preferred instrument of vengeance, partly because the proportion of German menfolk around was low, most of them being in the ranks. The failure of the Germans to dump their liquor before the enemy arrived did much to aggravate the situation, since even good-natured Soviet soldiers tended to become animals when they were good and drunk. Old women and young girls were gang-raped, sometimes until they died, and anybody who showed the slightest inclination to object was casually shot. Women were found stripped naked, crucified with nails to barn doors. Tanks rolled over and crushed columns of refugees.

What really infuriated many Soviet troops was the relative prosperity of even the humblest German farmer, compared to the widespread poverty of the USSR. Most German farmhouses had electric lighting and radio receivers, unthinkable luxuries for the average Soviet peasant. These folk had invaded the Soviet Union to plunder the people when the Germans were so much better off? The worst that could be done wasn't half enough.

Not all of the soldiers were so cruel, of course, some trying to be kindly to destitute civilians -- particularly children -- but there was little official attempt to restrain the troops, and in fact on occasions soldiers simply shot officers who tried to do so. Red Army troops were often very undisciplined and insubordinate, surprising given the Soviet state's inclination to the most drastic punishments for downright imaginary infractions. They were not the obedient little Red robots that state propaganda made them out to be.

Although newsreels might have reported how troops would charge shouting: "For Stalin! For the Motherland!" -- later a veteran would comment: "I'm sure we shouted something ... but I don't think it was that polite." One story related how a truck was blocking a vital road, badly snarling traffic. A woman soldier named Lydia who was trying to direct the traffic lit into the driver, who simply poured back abuse in her face -- until he noticed the door of a staff car open, to see an angry Marshal Rokossovsky get out with a pistol in his hand. The driver froze with terror. An officer who was in the cab of the truck with him got out and ran away into the bushes.

Those officers who tried to go up the chain of command about the rapes and atrocities were told to shut up; if they didn't, they stood a good chance of being arrested. The official line was that things like that didn't happen. Of course they did. If young men, of any nationality or race, are given weapons and allowed to do as they please, more than a few are likely to take full advantage of the situation without any apparent pains of conscience.

* Besides, it wasn't like they were doing things that those at the top didn't do as well. After the informal looting and vandalism of frontline troops had moved on, specialist NKVD units came in to inventory the catch and grab everything they could, as per Stalin's plan to squeeze the Germans for everything he could get out of them.

The NKVD would obtain very valuable German technologies and technical expertise for the Soviet Union, though most of the top German scientists and researchers would flee West and surrender to the British and Americans. The Soviets would also obtain quantities of raw materials and numbers of Germans for forced labor, though Soviet citizens would continue to be the backbone of Stalin's work camps. As far as the seizure of factory machinery went, however, it would prove to be about as wasteful an exercise as the mindless looting of the troops. Industrial machinery is normally specified to meet the requirements of a specific task. Trying to take some machine and shoehorn it into a process it wasn't specifically designed for is troublesome, in fact likely to be more troublesome than it's worth. Such machinery also requires regular maintenance and people who are trained in its operation, as well as a logistical system to obtain parts and support to keep it running. Without such things, it's generally no more than so much cumbersome junk.

It was another sign of Stalin's crude thinking that he saw machinery as something like so many bales of hay or trainloads of coal, to be tallied up on a list of valuables; and results were the Stalinist system at its worst. The machinery looted from factories and the like would mostly end up as rusty scrap -- which was just as well because often it had been damaged beyond reasonable repair in its removal and transport anyway. Of course, the effort did help weaken the hated Germans, but if that had been the objective, it would have been much less effort to have simply dynamited the lot of it. Such considerations were beyond the scope of the orders given the NKVD teams, and they were very earnest in making sure nothing of importance was overlooked.

* Harshness might have been satisfying, but it had a serious drawbacks. It made the Germans more willing to fight, and Goebbels' propaganda machine played up Soviet atrocities for all they were worth. Goebbels accused "the Jew Ilya Ehrenberg, Stalin's favorite rabble-rouser", of inciting the rapes. Ehrenberg protested, truthfully, that he had actually never said any such specific thing, for all the difference it made.

The revenge also distracted Soviet troops from the business of fighting. It was more fun to grab loot and women than it was to confront an enemy that, however badly bruised, was still able to fight back. Rokossovsky understood this and issued orders to discourage such misconduct, but his orders were poorly enforced. Having acquired bad habits, Soviet troops would also often become indiscriminate in their application, engaging in rape and looting against supposedly "friendly" populations elsewhere and leading local Communist leaders to complain to Stalin. Koba was furious when he was told British troops were much better-behaved than his own.

Many Germans managed to stay out of the rough hands of the Red Army. In the first few weeks of 1945, an estimated 8.5 million fled west. It was a brutal journey, undertaken in very cold weather without food or shelter, with Poles robbing and beating them when the opportunity arose. Even when the refugees made it to the strictly relative safety of Berlin and other place in

the west, they were not treated very well by Nazi authorities and things would remain harsh. Running away was still better than the alternative.

* Hitler continued his own preparations for a last stand. A few months earlier he had established a home defense force, the "Volkssturm", its ranks to be staffed by old men and teenage boys. Of course Hitler thought the Volkssturm would be able to work miracles, and he was also careful to make sure that the Volkssturm remained under direct Nazi Party control and not handed over to the untrustworthy German Army. He was oblivious to the unsuitability of the Volkssturm's personnel for combat, not merely because of the ages involved but because of the general lack of training and equipment.

That unsuitability was obvious to others. German troops in the front lines were demoralized to find out that their young brothers, young sons, fathers, and even grandfathers were being stockpiled as cannon fodder. The fact that the only significant military effect the Volkssturm soldiers were likely to have was to make the Soviets expend more ammunition to slaughter them only added to the distress. Many German civilians were also deeply skeptical of the idea, though there were others who believed Nazi propaganda that the Volkssturm would help turn the tide of the war. For many people, it was easier to cling to transparent fantasies instead of accept the humiliating truth that they had been deluded.

[14.4] THE YALTA CONFERENCE

* While the Red Army paused on the Oder, Allied leaders were converging on Yalta, a resort in the Crimea, for a conference to discuss the last actions of the war and what would come after. Roosevelt arrived at Malta on the cruiser USS QUINCY on 2 February 1945, meeting up with Churchill and Anthony Eden. Roosevelt was 63 and in obviously poor health, and in fact he would be dead in a few months. The health of his advisor Harry Hopkins had long been bad and was now the decline -- Hopkins had spent months in the hospital during 1944, effectively taking him out of the loop on events, and in fact he would only live another year.

Roosevelt, Churchill, and their entourages flew on to Yalta on 3 February. Stalin arrived the next morning, 4 February, having come by train since he hated to fly. He was in good health and confident, knowing perfectly well that he held trump cards in the game. The negotiations were superficially polite and formally emphasized the solidity of the alliance against Hitler, but after the tragedy of the Warsaw Uprising and other events of 1944 there was a strong undercurrent of suspicion.

The sessions began that afternoon and went on for the better part of a week. The first serious item on the agenda was a review of the strategic situation. The deputy chief of the Red Army general staff, General Aleksei Antonov, started off by delivering a report on the progress and current disposition of the Red Army on the Oder, concluding that the Germans were consolidating forces from other sectors to focus on the Soviet threat and that the final battle would be a tough one. In response, General George Marshall described plans in the West, stating that a drive on the Rhine would begin on 8 February. The Soviets were hoping that the Western

Allies would also conduct a simultaneous offensive in northern Italy to keep the Germans from shifting forces from that front, but Marshall replied that the resources were being dedicated to the Rhine offensive.

Then the talks went on to political matters. There was of course the issue of the future of Poland, a matter of major importance to the British. Stalin made it clear that he had no use for the London Poles, astoundingly accusing them of being collaborators with the Germans, and also that the prewar Polish border with the USSR was to be shifted to the west. The Soviets suggested that Poland's border with Germany could be shifted west as well to make up for the lost land. An agreement was hammered out on the matter, but everyone recognized it was meaningless. Roosevelt's chief military advisor, Admiral William D. Leahy, protested that the agreement established with the Russians was "so elastic that the Russians can stretch it all the way from Yalta to Washington without technically breaking it."

This was not news to Roosevelt: "I know, Bill, I know it. But it's the best I can do for Poland at this time."

Work on a plan for the occupation of Germany had been conducted by a "European Advisory Commission (EAC)", which first met in November 1944. The EAC's work was reviewed at Yalta, with Churchill insisting that the French have a part in the occupation, adding their weight in case the Americans decided to go back home. In fact, Roosevelt came right out and said that the American occupation of Germany would probably last only about two years. Witnesses saw Stalin's eyes light up at the remark.

The Soviets were also insistent that the Germans pay war reparations. This made British and American diplomats uneasy, since they remembered how troublesome the reparations imposed on Germany after the First World War had proven -- but Stalin replied to objections with bottled-up fury that the Soviet Union had suffered greatly at German hands and that the reparations were only just. Roosevelt pushed through an agreement that a reparations commission would nail down the details of the issue, leaving the matter open to further discussion. Similarly, ideas for the postwar dismemberment of Germany into smaller states were deferred to further discussion, in effect stalling on the issue.

* The Americans had axes to grind of their own, the most important being a request that the USSR declare war on Japan after the fall of Germany. This was an extremely important issue to Roosevelt. In hindsight, the war in the Pacific was almost over by early 1945, but at the time the Americans had good reason to believe that much worse was yet to come and that it would take several more years to defeat Japan. US forces were now contemplating an assault on the Japanese home islands that promised to be hideously expensive -- dwarfing the misery accumulated by the campaign against Japan to that time.

If the USSR entered the struggle against Japan, the Japanese would be that much more pressured to cave in, and Soviet forces would deal with the large numbers of Japanese troops still present in Manchuria and able to fight. Roosevelt was not at all keen on committing US forces to the East Asia mainland, believing with good reason that it would be as hideous a sink for American resources as it had been for the Japanese. Stalin was willing to help -- for a price, the USSR to

obtain control of the Kurile Islands and half of Sakhalin Island north of Japan, and concessions in possessions relieved from the Japanese on the Asian mainland.

Roosevelt was also able to obtain Soviet agreement to the president's ideas for establishment of a United Nations (UN) organization that would help keep the peace in the postwar era. The president saw the UN as a way to encourage collective security that would prevent a Third World War, and also restrain America from slipping back into isolationism, squandering all the nation had achieved in international influence from the expenditure of blood and treasure.

* The Big Three signed a final document over lunch on 11 February. Churchill signed first, Stalin suggesting it would be appropriate since otherwise people might think he, Stalin, had run the conference. He might not have actually run it, but he certainly held the good cards and played them for all they were worth. It had been a confrontational meeting, more a session in adversarial negotiations than a conference of friends. At one point Roosevelt, ever the smooth talker, had tried to reduce the tensions by telling Stalin that he was known as "Uncle Joe" in the West. Stalin simply became offended, calling it "unfriendly" -- though this was apparently just a ploy, since Molotov quickly added: "He is just pulling your leg ... all Russia knows you call him Uncle Joe."

Despite the difficulties, Roosevelt had got what he wanted out of the Yalta Conference -- Soviet agreement to join the war on Japan and to help set up the United Nations. In contrast, Churchill and the British were disgusted. Foreign Minister Eden wrote later: "A terrible party, I thought, the president vague and loose and ineffective. W [Winston Churchill] understanding that business was flagging made desperate efforts and too long speeches to get things going again. Stalin's attitude to small countries struck me as grim, not to say sinister. I was greatly relieved when the whole business was over."

As far as Stalin went, he couldn't have been happier with the results. There was little the British and Americans could really do about what happened to countries occupied by the Red Army, and so all the agreements amounted to was cosmetics, which Stalin planned to pay no more mind to than he needed. When Molotov fussed about some of the wording of the agreements afterwards, Koba shrugged it off: "Never mind. We'll do it in our own way later."

The Western Allies have been accused ever since of "selling out" Eastern Europe at Yalta, with parallels drawn to the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact. There is really no comparison: the Nazi-Soviet pact was an agreement between the Reich and the USSR to collaborate on aggression, while Yalta simply amounted to Stalin saying, in a lightly veiled fashion, that he would do as he pleased, and there was nothing the Western Allies could do about it.

The reality was there *wasn't* anything they could do about it. Britain didn't have the resources to fight the Soviets, and though the USA did, Roosevelt had absolutely no political mandate for doing so -- what could he do, simply tell the electorate that he had personally decided to commit the nation to a new war with an ally that had been publicly praised up to that time? Hitler could and did do such things, but everyone knew Hitler was a tyrant, including Hitler.

Even before America entered the war, the Nazis had been seen as the real threat to US interests, and the primary American goal of the conflict was to destroy the Nazi regime. After the US

entered the war, it was obvious that the Soviet Union would do the lion's share of the work in that endeavor, and that the defeat of the Reich by the USSR would mean Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. The most the British and Americans could do for the nations of Eastern Europe was engage in diplomacy in hopes of softening Soviet policy. Doing more would have meant a military confrontation that was simply out of the question.

* It is worth noting in this context that General Charles de Gaulle, the leader of newly liberated France, had visited Moscow in December 1944 to sign a Franco-Soviet friendship treaty. De Gaulle saw completely through Stalin, later describing him as a cunning tyrant with grand ambitions and dedicated to deception, and bluntly rejected as dishonorable Soviet arguments that France recognize the Lublin Committee as the legitimate government of Poland.

During the dinner that followed discussions, Kruschev later wrote that Stalin unusually got roaring drunk, making jokes about arresting various generals and officials, and even saying that he ought to send his own interpreter to the Gulag since "he knew too much." De Gaulle commented in his dry way that none of the guests at the dinner seemed very amused by these jokes.

[14.5] PREPARING FOR THE FINAL OFFENSIVE

* Hitler had promised that he had established a "Thousand Year Reich", but as 1944 drew to a close it was obvious that the end was near. Germany was in ruins, while the Western Allies closed in from the West and the Soviets closed in from the East.

With the Luftwaffe running out of gas and pilots, hopelessly outnumbered in the skies, British and American bombers pounded Germany's cities and industries into rubble. Fuel supplies dried up and fighter-bombers shot up anything that moved on the roads by daylight. Allied forces greatly outnumbered the Wehrmacht and were vastly better supplied, but Hitler refused to contemplate surrender. He threw whatever reinforcements he could scrape up to the East in hopes of blocking, or in his delusions even defeating, the Red Army. In early February, Goebbels noted that the Fuehrer seemed "utterly exhausted" but was convinced that he had "halfway succeeded in restabilizing the situation in the East." Goebbels then commented in cautious way that he was "a little skeptical. Just in the last few months the Fuehrer has sometimes made mistakes in his judgement of our military possibilities."

The lull in the fighting was entirely due to a reconsideration of offensive strategy on the Soviet side. Stalin had called Zhukov from the Yalta Conference on 6 February 1945 and ordered that the drive on Berlin be postponed. The Red Army was to concentrate on East Prussia for the moment, driving north to clear out the threat to its flank before beginning the final push on Berlin. Stalin may have also wanted to prolong the war a little in hopes of improving the Soviet Union's standing at the end of the conflict.

In any case, Zhukov's First Belorussian Front turned right and drove towards Kolberg on the Baltic, while Rokossovsky's Second Belorussian Front moved west to meet them, surrounding

Danzig along the way. To the south, Konev's First Ukrainian Front conducted a limited offensive to keep up the pressure along the line, with this thrust quickly reaching the Neisse. Konev's troops overran the industrial area of Silesia, capturing many factories and mines intact. It was a major economic disaster to the Reich.

The Germans in East Prussia had known their position was hopeless well before the February offensive, and many had been trying to escape. On 10 January, the Red Navy submarine S-13 had put three torpedoes into the WILHELM GUSTLOFF, loaded down with 7,000 refugees. Over 6,000 people died in the frigid waters of the Baltic. On 10 February, the S-13 also torpedoed the STEUBEN and sent it to the bottom, with 3,500 refugees on board. The submarine's captain, A.I. Marinesco, was recommended Hero of the Soviet Union, but he had a sexual liaison with a foreigner and was denied the award. He was finally given the HSU posthumously in 1990, at the last hour of the Soviet state.

The German 2nd Army was trapped with the civilians in Danzig. Hitler sacked its commander, Colonel General Walter Weiss, and on 12 March appointed General Dietrich von Saucken in his place. Saucken was something of an odd choice for Hitler, since the general was a thorough aristocrat -- he even wore a monocle -- and made no secret of his contempt for the low-bred Nazis. Hitler briefed Saucken and told him that he was to take orders from the Gauleiter in Danzig. Saucken replied stiffly: "I have no intention of placing myself under the orders of a Gauleiter."

Even Guderian, who had often argued with Hitler and was a witness to the scene, was shocked, all the more so because Saucken did not even bother to add "Mein Fuehrer" to the response. Even more astounding, Hitler meekly caved in: "All right, keep the command to yourself." Saucken flew to Danzig on 13 March and did everything he could to hold the line and get the civilians out. When the city finally fell on 28 March, the Red Army exceeded itself in the brutality inflicted on those who had not been able to flee. The fortified city of Koenigsberg held out until 10 April, the last of the "Baltic Balcony" to fall to the Red Army. As if to emphasize the crushing defeat, on 16 April a Soviet submarine sent the hospital ship GOYA to the bottom, along with most of the 7,000 refugees on board.

By this time, the Western Allies were across the Rhine and German resistance against them was fading out. German troops and civilians were fleeing West to surrender to the British and Americans. Himmler, discouraged by his lack of success, resigned his command of Army Group Vistula, though since he dared not make such a request of Hitler himself, Guderian suggested doing it for him. Himmler agreed and Guderian eagerly did him the favor.

Command of Army Group Vistula fell to Colonel General Gotthardt Heinrici, currently commander of the 1st Panzer Army, which was then trying to hold the line against Konev. When Heinrici arrived, Himmler gave him a pompous and long-winded briefing, until news of another disaster on the front arrived. Himmler broke off the briefing and departed without further delay.

Many other Germans in uniform, fully aware of the treatment they would receive at the hands of Soviet troops on surrendering, were much more resolute than Himmler, willing to fight on to the last. They had no practical alternative. They were to be given little reward for their diligence.

Despite the loyalty of the German people to their Fuehrer, he felt they had let him down. Following the Soviet capture of the resources of Silesia, on 19 March 1945 he issued the "Nero Befehl (Nero Order)", which dictated the widespread destruction of Germany's material resources. It was done to deny the enemy rewards for their conquests, as well as to punish the German people, who Hitler stated with lunatic arrogance had "proved themselves unworthy of me."

The fact was plain that it was his own catastrophic failures of judgement and leadership that had led to disaster. Hitler could have worked for peace and prosperity, but instead he had recklessly chosen war and conquest -- and having unleashed a dragon, the dragon had now turned on him. There was no way the Fuehrer could have conceded his own responsibility in the matter: the despised Slavs had proven themselves stronger than the weakling Germans and so the Germans did not deserve to survive. To add to the arrogance, Martin Bormann had been sent off a few days earlier to the south to find places to stash Nazi loot. The people might starve, but the Nazis would ensure they kept the treasures they had stolen from others.

Fortunately, the Nero Order was not implemented with any great enthusiasm, and in fact in some cases German Army officers posted guards around important installations to prevent hardcore Nazis from destroying them. Germany was being thoroughly ruined by the simple violence of warfare. Attempting to deliberately enhance the ruin was madness. The Fuehrer had no future; his people did, and they had to give serious consideration of how to survive in that future beyond the Fuehrer.

The clock was rapidly approaching midnight. On 7 March 1945, the Americans had captured a bridge over the Rhine at Remagen and were energetically using it to establish an ever-expanding foothold on the east bank, undeterred by frantic German counterattacks. Hitler got the news the next day and took it with a certain punch-drunk passivity, but the next day he was in a rage and ordered the execution of five German officers, much to the shock of the German Army.

The Fuehrer had ventured out of his bunker on 13 March to visit the Oder front, mostly for the benefit of Goebbels' cameramen. He did not review the troops, instead meeting with a group of officers, who were shocked at how white and unhealthy he looked. One officer commented on the Fuehrer's "glittering eyes, which reminded me of those of a snake." Hitler returned to his bunker and would not leave it again alive. There were heavy air raids on Berlin that day that killed thousands of civilians and left tens of thousands homeless.

* In the meantime, on 13 February 1945, the Red Army had taken Budapest after a 50-day siege. The Hungarians, tired of the war, had felt some relief when the Soviets approached, but Stalin's troops demonstrated much of the same inclination towards rape, looting, and brutality that they had put in practice elsewhere. The Hungarians quickly took a dislike to their "liberators". Churchill clearly saw his belief that the Soviets planned to take control of Eastern Europe coming true.

In fact, by this time, Stalin's attitude towards the Western Allies was drifting towards outright hostility, with Soviet officials being as uncooperative and rude as possible. Even Roosevelt, whose attitude toward the Soviets had been traditionally been inclined towards giving them the

benefit of the doubt, was becoming disgusted by this time, admitted in late March that "we can't do business with Stalin. He has broken every one of the promises he made at Yalta."

At the same, Churchill was pushing for a drive on Berlin; British Field Marshal Montgomery was enthusiastic about the idea. Churchill understood that the capture of Berlin would be a major propaganda victory, and would give the Western Allies a better bargaining position with the Soviets after the war. The British made no secret of their interest in Berlin to the Soviets, and it was a matter of concern to Stalin.

US General Dwight Eisenhower, the military supreme commander in Europe, had other ideas. He felt that his primary responsibility was to minimize the losses among his troops -- an attitude that the Soviet high command would have found almost baffling -- and didn't believe that Berlin would be worth the casualties required to capture it. In particular, Eisenhower considered Montgomery's interest in the capture of Berlin to be motivated solely by Monty's well-established love for glory. Besides, according to the occupation plan agreed on at Yalta, much of the territory the Western Allies would capture in northern Germany would simply be handed over to the Soviets after the war anyway.

Eisenhower focused his armies on central Germany, with Leipzig and Dresden as their objectives. He wanted to capture what was left of Germany's heavy industries, and he also feared that the Nazi regime was preparing to make a fanatical last stand in the mountains of southeastern Germany and western Austria, an action that could prolong the war by a year or more. As far as the "AlpenFestung (Alpine Fortress)" or "National Redoubt" in the Alps was concerned, Eisenhower needn't have worried: it never really existed except as a fantasy of overblown Nazi propaganda. Some Allied intelligence officers suspected as much, but Hitler's mad transfers of forces southward gave the idea some credibility.

Eisenhower sent a message to Stalin describing his strategy without consulting with the British ahead of time, and the result was a furious quarrel between British and American leadership. Eisenhower refused to change his decision, and the message was given to Stalin on 31 March by the head of the US military mission to the USSR, Major General John R. Deane. Stalin told Deane that he approved of Eisenhower's plans, and that the Red Army would drive southwest to link up with American and British forces.

* In reality Stalin, who lied without a second thought himself, assumed that Eisenhower was lying as well, and that the Western Allies were planning to double-cross him and take the city anyway. The American capture of the bridge at Remagen was almost as big a shock to Koba as it was to Hitler; Stalin hadn't expected the Western Allies to penetrate the Rhine barrier so quickly. He understood the propaganda value of Berlin as well as Churchill did, and decided that it was now time to move. Ironically and characteristically, Stalin had mercilessly badgered the Western Allies for years about a second front, and now that he had one, he was worried that his comrades-in-arms might use it to gain an advantage on him.

He called his generals to Moscow at the beginning of April. The offensive was to be conducted primarily by Zhukov's First Belorussian Front and Konev's First Ukrainian Front. Zhukov was nominally to be in overall command, but in reality Stalin blatantly played the two generals off

against each other, first giving them bogus intelligence about Eisenhower's "plan" to capture Berlin to get them in a competitive mood, and then modifying the overall Red Army plan for the offensive so that, if circumstances justified it, Konev might take Berlin instead of Zhukov.

Despite the fact that Zhukov had interceded in Konev's behalf during the Battle of Moscow, the two generals disliked each other strongly. They were both burly men and aggressive, even ruthless, commanders, but that was about as far as the resemblance went. Zhukov was short, Konev tall; Zhukov was harsh with his own people, Konev paternalistic; Zhukov was coarse, Konev had an intellectual bent. Zhukov looked down on Konev because he came out of the ranks of the political commissars, not the regular military, and Konev predictably resented it. Konev also resented the fact that Zhukov was the object of such glorification by the state propaganda apparatus. The two set to work on organizing their parts in the offensive, pushing their staffs to the limit to get things in order as fast as possible.

Of course Stalin always had a devious agenda, and underlying the competition he had created between the two generals was his distrust of anyone who was a potential rival. Konev wasn't the only one who was irritated by Zhukov's prominence. Although Stalin called Zhukov to his face "my Suvorov", after the great Russian general who had defeated Napoleon, and Zhukov was one of the few people who would bluntly argue with Koba, there were stories that the normally controlled and calculating Stalin flew into rages at Zhukov's insufficiently subordinate attitude.

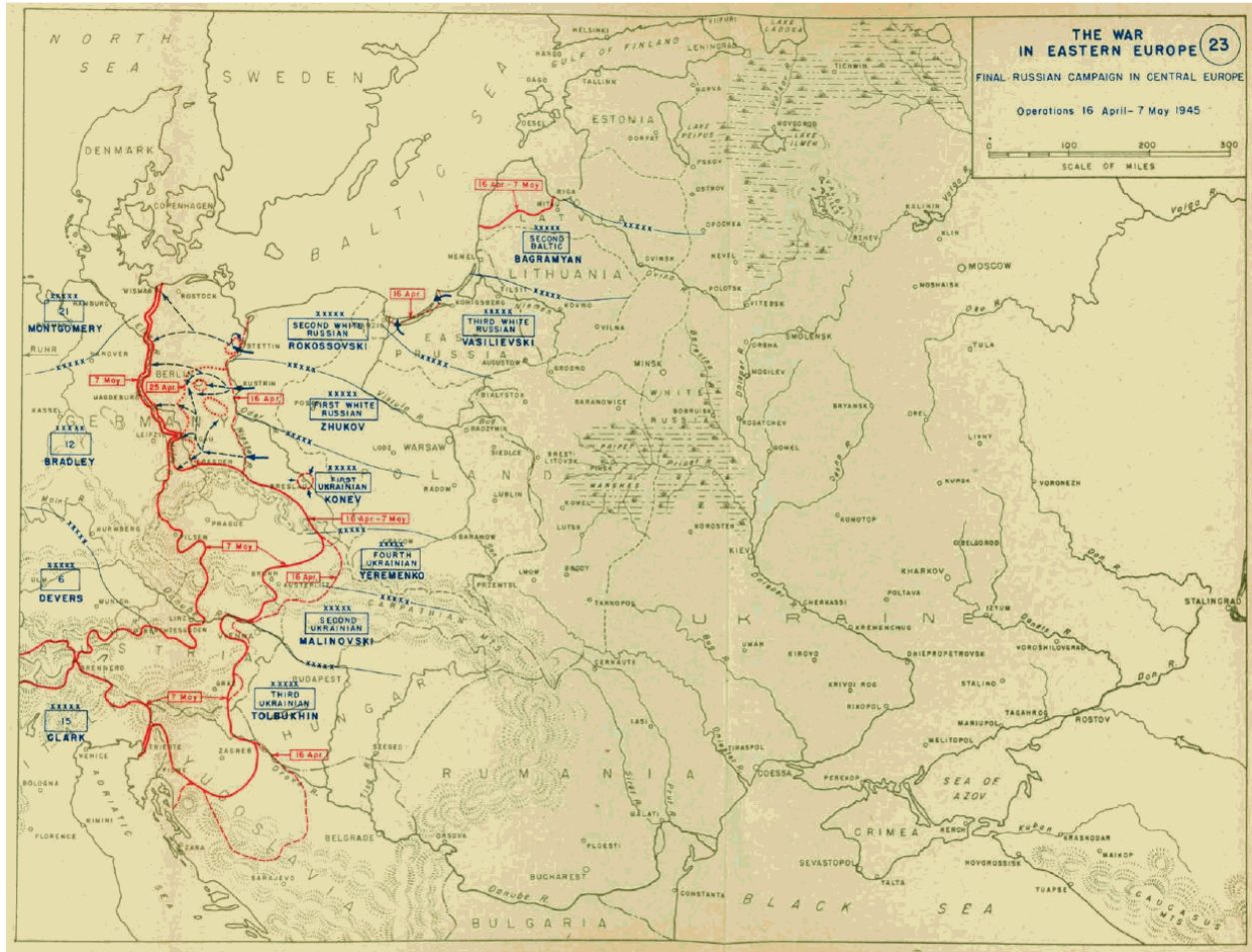
The NKVD had been quietly collecting evidence against Zhukov even as far back as the victory in Khalkin-Gol for the day that a case might be made against him. That would have to wait until Hitler was dragged through the streets of Moscow in chains or otherwise dealt with to Stalin's satisfaction. For the moment, Stalin needed Zhukov and continued to be friendly to his face.

The preparations for the offensive were massive and exhausting. The Germans had wrecked the rail lines as they withdrew, and Polish trains had used a different track gauge anyway, so streams of American Studebaker 6x6 trucks brought up a flood of supplies of weapons, ammunition, food, and everything else needed for the battle. Zhukov accumulated seven million artillery shells for the opening phases alone. 40 engineering battalions worked night and day to put 25 bridges across the Oder to support Zhukov's drive. A detailed model of the city of Berlin was built at general headquarters, and all senior officers to be involved in the assault were put through a course with it. By mid-April, all was ready.

[15.0] On To Berlin

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* After almost four years of war, the Red Army was ready to begin the final push, driving on Berlin with massive armies in the face of desperate but faltering resistance. Although the outcome of the battle could not be in doubt, it would still prove to be as hard and painful as any other major battle in the East.



[15.1] STALIN'S FINAL OFFENSIVE

* The Soviet assault on Berlin was to involve a total of four Red Army fronts. Rokossovsky's Second Belorussian Front, having cleaned the Germans out of the Baltic states, would be on the northern flank of the attack, protecting Zhukov's First Belorussian Front, which was to drive on the city proper, more or less in coordination with Konev's First Ukrainian Front just to the south. Yeremenko's Fourth Ukrainian Front would keep up the pressure on the defense of southern Germany. The offensive would be conducted by about 2,500,000 men, 45,000 artillery pieces and Katyusha launchers, plus 6,250 tanks.

The Soviets were opposed by German Army Group Vistula under Colonel General Gotthardt Heinrici in the north and German Army Group Center under Field Marshal Ferdinand Schoerner in the south. Heinrici, who had replaced Himmler in the command just a few weeks earlier, was nothing like his predecessor. Heinrici a short, quiet, grim, blunt man who the Nazi leadership distrusted because he tended to speak his mind and who was also a devout churchgoer. In fact, he had been sidelined from command for a time after the disasters in the East in the summer of 1943. His troops trusted him, however, calling him "our tough little bastard." Schoerner, in contrast, was loud, overbearing, and bullying, his major virtue in the eyes of his superiors being that he was a 100% Nazi. Though his troops differed on the quality of his generalship, they were in agreement that he was a 100% bastard.

While the main show against Berlin was underway, Malinovsky's Second Ukrainian Front would drive into Austria, ensuring that Hitler couldn't shuttle troops north to brace up the defense of the city. Hitler understood the threat to Berlin from the East -- even in his shaky condition, it would have been hard to ignore the Red Army when it was all but camping on his doorstep -- and had engaged in some imaginative exercises to scrape up more troops.

In early April, Heinrici had attended a meeting in the Fuehrer's bunker in Berlin, where Hitler's chief lieutenants offered personnel to help hold the line on the Oder. Goering offered 100,000 Luftwaffe men; Himmler 25,000 SS troopers; and Admiral Doenitz offered 12,000 navy men. Heinrici was appalled and replied that such inexperienced soldiers would certainly be slaughtered. Goering took offense at the implied slight since he believed his people were "ubermenschen", and Hitler said that the reinforcements could be kept in the rear as reserves and brought up to standard in time.

In time? What time? Heinrici got about 35,000 of the men he was promised and found them, to no surprise, to be a completely mixed lot of old and young who were completely unprepared for frontline combat. There were even a few men who showed up in tuxedos, apparently having been press-ganged while they were out on the town. Heinrici informed Berlin that the only thing that the lot of them would be good for was digging ditches and the like. Berlin told him to shut up and arm them. Arm them? With what? All he could scrape up was about a thousand old rifles, many of which were not compatible with any ammunition he had in quantity.

In the city, Berliners were now throwing up barricades and digging trenches against the imminent assault. The work hadn't really started until March, and it was all somewhat pathetic. A black joke made the rounds that it would take the Soviets two hours and five minutes to get through one of the obstacles: two hours to laugh at it, five minutes to actually overrun it.

The Soviet forces that would drive on Berlin had an overwhelming advantage over the Germans in all categories of military power, ranging from three to one to five to one, and the Red Army was well-equipped with modern and thoroughly combat-proven weapons; the outcome of the coming battle could not be doubted by anyone with any sense. The only question was how long it would take and how much it would cost. German officers were appalled to find that when the Soviets blasted propaganda at young conscript soldiers in the frontline trenches, some of the soldiers would shout back and ask what kind of treatment they could expect to receive as prisoners.

Hitler remained in hiding in his bunker, still grasping at straws for a miracle victory. He was ecstatic when he heard on 13 April 1945 that American President Roosevelt had died the day before, seeing it as the turning point of his fortunes. One witness said "he clung to [the news] like a drowning man to a straw." Soon, Hitler predicted, the Soviets and the Western Allies would fall out and be at each other's throats. He continued to issue his ranting declarations, calling on Germans to fight to the death.

Citizens understood the "death" part of the declarations only too well. Lawyers were working overtime helping people make out wills, and rat poison and cyanide capsules were in great demand. That Christmas a black joke had been making the rounds in Berlin: "Be practical -- give a coffin." Another joke in circulation said that the signs that littered the city indicating "LSR" for "Luftschutzraum (Air Raid Shelter)" actually meant "Lernt Schnell Russische (Learn Russian Quickly)". The "Heil Hitler" greeting had all but disappeared among the citizens.

* Starting on the night of 12 April, the Red Army sent out battalion-sized units to probe German defenses, gradually escalating the probes and backing them up with artillery barrages. Everyone on both sides knew the storm was coming within days. At 3:00 AM on 16 April the storm broke, with Zhukov's forces hammering on German positions in front of the Soviet bridgehead at Kustrin, on the west bank of the Oder, with 10,000 guns and 400 Katyusha barrage rocket launchers. Within a half hour, a half-million shells had fallen on the German Ninth Army. The thunder was audible in Berlin.

The bombardment was noisy and spectacular but not very effective. Heinrici had anticipated it and quietly pulled the bulk of his troops back from the front lines to defenses in the rear. There were two lines of defenses in front of the heights and a very solid line of defense with mortar pits and antitank gun positions on the top of the Seelowe Heights, rugged high ground well behind the front lines. When one of his officers protested at the pullback, Heinrici replied in his matter-of-fact way: "You don't put your head under a trip hammer, do you? You pull it back in time."

At 5:30 AM, three Soviet armies moved forward from the Soviet bridgehead into the churned-up German front lines. Their way was in principle illuminated by 143 searchlights on the east bank of the Oder, which Zhukov had arranged to help blind the Germans and give his people an

advantage. In fact, in all the smoke and dust the searchlights simply confused the troops, and most of the soldiers halted to wait for daylight.

When the sun did come up, the troops were disturbed to find that the shattered frontline defenses into which they were moving into were empty of the remains of German soldiers. The lack of enemy artillery fire was also eerie, and experienced troops got the unpleasant suspicion they were advancing into a trap. They were absolutely correct. When Red Army tanks and infantry had advanced well into range, they were hit by a storm of German artillery and machine-gun fire that stopped the advance in its tracks, at least for the moment. The lowlands in front of the Seelowe Heights were crisscrossed by streams and canals, creating obstacles to armor and other vehicles, and the ferocious bombardment had churned up the terrain. Soviet troops were mired down and easy targets.

Konev began his bombardment at 4:15 AM, which was followed up by massive air raids into the German rear. Konev did not have a bridgehead on the western bank of the Neisse and didn't think it would be practical to bridge the river in the dark. To provide cover for his engineers, he had aircraft lay down a thick cloud of smoke while rockets and artillery plastered German positions. Spearheads went across the river at 5:55 AM. By midmorning, engineers had set up twenty pontoon bridges. Tanks that were too heavy for the pontoon bridges were ferried across.

The Germans were expecting an attack to the south, towards Prague, and the First Ukrainian Front achieved tactical surprise, rapidly penetrating the first line of German defenses. They found shell-shocked Germans in the trenches, many of whom surrendered with little or no resistance, calling out in rough Russian: "Ivan, don't shoot!" One German prisoner told his interrogators: "The only promise Hitler has kept is the one he made before coming to power: Give me ten years and you will not be able to recognize Germany."

Konev's initial success contrasted sharply with Zhukov's difficulties. Zhukov normally scouted out enemy defenses personally before beginning an assault, but he had been distracted by Stalin's nagging and had relied on aerial reconnaissance photographs for planning his attack. Zhukov assumed that the sheer weight of the preliminary bombardment and his masses of troops would carry the day. He later admitted that he had greatly underestimated the strength of the German defenses. He still descended on General Vasily Chuikov, commander of the Eighth Guards Army and the hero of Stalingrad, and chewed him up one side and down the other. Chuikov, who disliked Zhukov for his arrogance and ambition, could only try to assure him that things would work out, but Zhukov went on with his tirade.

In mid-afternoon, in an attempt to hurry things along, Zhukov ordered armored forces to the front. Chuikov was horrified, since he saw that would create a hideous traffic jam. That was exactly what happened, with vehicles immobilized while Red Army troops at the front continued to be chewed up by the Germans. The confused state at the front also led to Red Army units suffering more than the usual share of casualties from misdirected Soviet attack aircraft and artillery batteries. However, the Soviets did make some progress, helped by air strikes that destroyed much of Heinrici's heavy artillery on top of the heights, and the Germans were taking serious casualties themselves. That was not much consolation to Zhukov, who in his own turn had to endure being cut down to size by Stalin during a conversation over radio that evening:

Koba taunted Zhukov with Konev's success to the south, demanded results, and then cut off the conversation abruptly.

Of course, the assault on Berlin couldn't be concealed from the Western Allies. For the moment, Stalin kept up the lie he had fed Eisenhower. The Americans were told that the Red Army was merely performing a "reconnaissance in force" to determine the strength of German defenses in the area.

* The German defense of the Seelow Heights began to erode the next day, 17 April, with the simple size and weight of the attackers chewing up the defenders and eroding holes in their lines. Desperate and in some cases deliberately suicidal attacks by Luftwaffe pilots against the Red Army's bridges over the Oder proved largely futile. Such damage as they inflicted at the cost of their lives was quickly made good.

Heinrici wanted to counterattack, using 30,000 troops then stationed in the town of Frankfurt-on-Oder to the south (of course, not the same place as the city of Frankfurt to the west, now already in Allied hands). These troops were in immediate danger of being encircled by Konev's First Ukrainian Front, which was moving forward rapidly. He needed these soldiers to halt Konev's advance so he could focus on Zhukov. However, Frankfurt-on-Oder had been designated as a "fortified place" by the Fuehrer, and though Heinrici called to request permission to use these troops, Hitler turned him down flat.

As a result, Konev's First Ukrainian Front continued to move west rapidly. Konev had a lot of good news to report to Stalin that night and Koba was appreciative. Stalin pointed out that Zhukov was having troubles and suggested that the First Belorussian Front be shifted from its hammering at the Seelow Heights and join Konev's offensive. Konev knew this was logistically impractical, and also knew that if Zhukov came south Konev would be taking orders from him. Konev told Stalin that the First Ukrainian Front was strong enough to take Berlin, if Koba so wished. He did. Konev was authorized to shift his attack to the north and advance on the city.

Konev ordered his two tank armies to move on Berlin, instructing the commanders to cut off the western approaches to the city and isolate it, to go around strong points and to absolutely not perform frontal attacks. This would get them to the city quickly, with a minimum of wastage. The German units trapped behind the advance would then be cut off, to be given a choice between surrender and destruction. Konev's armor moved north the first thing in the morning of 18 April.

To the north, Zhukov continued to hammer in something resembling blind rage at the German defenses on the Seelow Heights, throwing in everything he had and all but oblivious to the piles of casualties. Back in the Fuehrer's bunker there was rejoicing over the continued frustration of Zhukov's offensive, with Hitler once again believing that his fortunes might still be retrieved.

His excitement was short-lived. That same day, 18 April, Rokossovsky's Second Belorussian Front had jumped off across the lower section of the Oder. The Germans fought back furiously and it would take the Soviets two days to break through, but efforts elsewhere were now showing results. On 19 April, Zhukov's troops finally cracked German defenses. Zhukov had shown little

finesse in the attack, losing at least 30,000 men in the meat grinder to the 12,000 casualties of the Germans, but the simple mass of the assault had finally ground down the defenders. Now Zhukov and Konev were truly in a race. Konev radioed his commanders to move faster.

Heinrici knew that disaster was finally on him and he once more called Berlin to ask that the troops in Frankfurt-on-Oder be released. He ended up talking to General Hans Krebs, the new German Army chief of staff. Krebs had replaced Guderian on 28 March, when Guderian finally decided to speak his mind to the Fuehrer. Witnesses described the confrontation between the two as a furious screaming match, with Hitler's face becoming paler and paler as Guderian's face got redder and redder. Some of the witnesses in attendance slipped out of the room and managed to arrange an "urgent call" for Guderian as a means of interrupting the quarrel. When Guderian returned, Hitler ordered him to take "six week's convalescent leave".

Krebs had been Guderian's deputy and moved up into his shoes. Krebs was apparently a good staff officer but not suited for the top command, more inclined to tell jokes than to bark orders and very quick to trim to changing winds. He was regarded as suitable for the job because he had little inclination to disagree with Hitler. In response to Heinrici's request, Krebs didn't even bother to talk to the Fuehrer; he simply barked at Heinrici to "hold all positions" and then hung up.

[15.2] HITLER ON THE ROPES

* The situation continued to fall apart at a rapid rate over the next few days. On 20 April, Hitler celebrated his 56th birthday in his bunker, with his senior Nazi lieutenants in attendance, including Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels, Reichsmarshal Hermann Goering, Reichsfuehrer Heinrich Himmler, and Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz. The Americans had also given the Fuehrer a birthday present that morning: a massive bombing raid on Berlin that inflicted major damage on the city, cutting gas and water supplies. Many officials began to flee west.

Down in the bunker, Goering was dressed in an olive drab field uniform instead of his usual imperial silk-and-satin dress uniforms. There were whispers at the party that he looked like an American general, presumably because he wanted to put on an agreeable appearance when he surrendered. In fact, Goering had already fled his mansion at Karinhall to the northwest of Berlin, with a convoy of dozens of trucks loaded down with the loot he had stolen from Germany's conquests. He himself had pushed the plunger to blast the mansion into ruins when he left. The failure of Goering's Luftwaffe to help stop the Allied tide against Germany -- a failure that had made even more vivid by Goering's tendency to make overblown boasts that he couldn't back up -- had left him out of favor with the Fuehrer, but Hitler was feeling agreeable with Goering that day.

Reichsfuehrer Heinrich Himmler was not in the Hitler's favor either. The Fuehrer was disappointed in Himmler's poor performance as commander of Army Group Vistula. Hitler would have been even more disappointed if he had known that Himmler was putting out feelers to make a deal with the Western Allies, going through the motions of smuggling a few Jews from

the concentration camps to safety in hopes the Americans and British would think he had turned over a new leaf. He was almost as deluded as Hitler. Whatever misgivings and problems the Western Allies had with the Soviets, Hitler and his lieutenants were the enemy, pure and simple, and at that late date the Germans had no real bargaining position. The Allies would win the war and soon; what did they have to discuss with vermin like Himmler? One German Army colonel who was sounded out by one of Himmler's underlings on the Reichsfuehrer's scheme replied that it was too little, too late, and Himmler was "the most unsuitable man in the whole of Germany for such negotiations."

Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz's star was still bright in Hitler's eyes. To be sure, Doenitz's attempt to strangle Britain with his U-boat fleet had failed, but Hitler, in an unusual outburst of reasonableness, had recognized that submarine construction had been given low priority. Doenitz was a dedicated Nazi, so devoted to the Fuehrer that he was regarded in some quarters as an overgrown Hitler Youth, and Hitler admired his crisp military efficiency. Hitler saw Doenitz as a possible successor -- though the admiral had competition in the form of Martin Bormann, the low-profile master schemer, "dear Martin" to the Fuehrer.

The guests urged Hitler to flee Berlin and go south to the mountains to lead continued resistance. He refused to do it, saying he could not flee Berlin and expect his soldiers to go on fighting. The meeting soon broke up, with most of the guest departing. Goering went to his castle in Bavaria, where he would soon be under house arrest. Himmler went off to pursue his futile peace initiatives. Doenitz was dispatched to take command of the defense of the Reich in the south.

Goebbels remained behind. He was the purest of pure Nazis, Hitler's old and trusted friend. That morning he had performed one of his last propagandist broadcasts, calling on Germans to trust in the Fuehrer and saying Hitler would lead them out of difficulties. Some Berliners listening to the broadcast concluded that Goebbels had gone completely mad. In any case, Hitler had asked him to stay. Goebbels would share the fate of the Fuehrer.

* Fate was approaching rapidly. At exactly 11:30 AM the next day, 21 April, the first Soviet shells slammed into Berlin, taking citizens by surprise and scattering dead and wounded on the pavement. Hitler thought that the Red Army must have been using long-range railroad guns, but was told that there were no rail lines in condition to bring such a weapon so far forward; the shells were from conventional heavy field artillery. In fact, the Soviets were close enough that they could see the landmarks of the city through field glasses.

Hitler, having woken up to the fact that the enemy was literally at the gates, threw together new elaborate plans to deal with the attackers. They were all fantasies; there were simply no resources left to take the counter-offensive. Heinrici, having reached the limit of his ability to endure such nonsense, told Chief of Staff Krebs that he wished to be relieved of command so he could fight in the ranks. Krebs didn't want to relay the request to the Fuehrer, but Heinrici insisted. The Fuehrer denied the request.

At midday on 21 April, the German Army cleared out of the big underground headquarters complex at Zossen, south of Berlin, just ahead of Konev's forces. The Red Army occupied the complex later that afternoon, finding only a caretaker and four soldiers. Three of the soldiers

surrendered without any hesitation, the fourth failing to do so only because he was too drunk to stand up. The caretaker took the amazed Russians on a tour of the facility. Suddenly a phone rang. One of the soldiers picked up the phone to hear a voice asking questions in German. The soldier answered in Russian: "Ivan is here, go to hell." -- and hung up.

On 22 April, Hitler tried to get reports on the progress of the counter-offensives he had ordered. Of course, he soon found out that nothing was happening. He flew into a mad rage, far more wild and raving than the tantrums to which everyone had become accustomed; he all but foamed at the mouth, cried out: "The war is lost!" -- and then, spent, collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut. His staff, appalled, tried to encourage him, saying he should leave Berlin and go to the mountains in the south. That brought him out of his stupor. He told his generals that they should leave, but he would stay and fight this one last battle.

On the afternoon of 22 April Hitler sent Keitel southwest of the city to give General Walther Wenck and his 12th Army orders to come to the rescue of Berlin and send the Red hordes packing. Keitel met with Wenck the next morning, 23 April, and blustered on at length. One witness reported: "We let him talk and we let him leave."

Wenck was a soldier's soldier, highly professional and a great inspiration to his men, and he knew perfectly well that he had been ordered to lead his troops to futile destruction. He shrugged and rearranged the orders to conform to reality: the 12th Army would attack, but it would simply be a rescue operation to help survivors of trapped German forces to the east escape the grasp of the Red Army.

On 24 April, Wenck's 12th Army to the southwest began its "relief operation". One of his officers wrote: "Who would have ever thought that it would be just a day's march from the Western Front to the Eastern Front?" There was no thought of defeating the Red Army, only to do everything that could be reasonably done to reach trapped German civilians and soldiers, and then withdraw west. Wenck hardly bothered to acknowledge most of the orders sent him, though communications and organization were in such a bad state that it wasn't much trouble to ignore them.

[15.3] ENCIRCLING BERLIN / MEETING ON THE ELBE

* The fact that the Germans didn't have the resources to conduct a counter-offensive didn't mean that they had given up the fight. In fact, as the Red Army approached Berlin, German resistance stiffened and Soviet progress slowed.

Konev's First Ukrainian Front encountered a particularly nasty obstacle, in the form of the Teltow Canal, which ran along the southern side of the city. The canal was wide and too deep to be easily forded; the Germans had heavily mined the approaches, blown all the bridges, and built up a set of strongpoints on the far side of the canal. They were manned by 15,000 troops, who were well-armed by the standards of the time.

Cracking the Teltow Canal line fell to General Pavel Rybalko and his Third Guards Tank Army. He spent all of 23 April bringing up 3,000 artillery pieces, mortars, and Katyusha rocket launchers, concentrating them on a narrow front. At 6:20 AM on 24 April, they all opened up, and then assault teams crossed the canal in collapsible boats to dig out strongpoints with flame throwers and explosive charges. The Germans didn't die easily, wiping out some of the teams or forcing them to fall back, but the outcome of the fight was never in doubt. By early afternoon, Soviet armor was rolling across the canal on top of pontoon bridges, even while fighting continued to crush German resistance up and down the waterway. There were no more serious obstacles in front of Konev's troops to keep them from reaching downtown Berlin.

While Rybalko's artillery was beginning their bombardment that morning, elements of his army were linking up in the northeast with their counterparts in Chuikov's Eighth Guards Army. Chuikov reported the incident to Frontal headquarters, and quickly got a reply from Zhukov to document all the details of the encounter. Chuikov, no doubt shaking his head, concluded that Zhukov wanted to make sure that he was properly credited as being the first to actually reach Berlin. In fact, troops of Zhukov's First Belorussian Front were already fighting their way into the northern districts of the city. Resistance was stubborn and it appeared likely that Konev would reach the city center first, but Stalin then intervened in Zhukov's favor, reserving that district for the First Belorussian Front.

* In the meantime, armored columns of the Second Belorussian Front had been circling around the city to the north, while counterparts in the First Ukrainian Front were moving up along the west side of city to meet them. Their progress was blocked by a group of Hitler Youth along with some elderly Volkssturm troops, armed mostly with the panzerfaust, an oversized one-shot antitank grenade launcher, sometimes called the "Foot Stuka" after the Stuka tank-buster aircraft. Many German commanders had refused to commit Hitler Youth to battle, feeling it would be irresponsible and dishonorable to send kids out to be slaughtered, but the defenders fought stubbornly for two days until they were overwhelmed. Zhukov and Konev's tanks finally linked up at noon on 25 April. Berlin was now surrounded.

That same day, 25 April, American and Soviet units finally joined hands on the Elbe, cutting Germany in half. The two forces had been very cautious about making contact with each other because of the risk of potentially disastrous "friendly fire" incidents. Radio signals had been going back and forth for a few days, with Soviet radio operators careful not to reveal unit locations because the Germans were listening in. In fact, German operators had even broken in on the conversations every now and then to make sarcastic remarks.

An advance patrol of Americans that had been sent to free some Allied prisoners made contact first, to be shot at until they got a Soviet prisoner to shout at his comrades and tell them to cease fire. After that, everyone got along famously, with the Russians hugging and even kissing startled Americans. Commanders of US General Patton's and Konev's armies met together for a steak banquet to celebrate the meeting, polished off by a victory cake and with plenty of champagne to wash it down.

[15.4] THE STRUGGLE FOR BERLIN

* Despite the camaraderie between the troops, tensions were evident under the surface. Patton felt that his armies should keep on going; there were Soviet generals who felt the same way. The generals did not determine policy. Marshal Budyonny told Stalin that he felt Soviet tanks should keep right on rolling until they reached the English Channel, but Stalin broke him off and mocked the idea. The Western Allies wanted Hitler defeated and were not interested in a fight with Stalin. Stalin on his part knew that the Soviet Union had to rest and rebuild with whatever help he could still pry out of his allies. He also had detailed knowledge from his spies of the fearsome weapon the Americans were building in the New Mexico desert.

Stalin would rebuild, get the atomic bomb himself, and deal with the West on more equal terms later. The battle for Berlin also factored into that consideration. On 25 April, the Red Army captured the Max Planck Institute for Physics in the city, which had been a center for Nazi nuclear research. The physicists, led by Werner Heisenberg, had fled West to surrender to the British, but the Soviets captured some real trophies, in the form of 250 kilograms (400 pounds) of refined uranium and tonnes of unrefined uranium oxide. NKVD specialists descended on the institute to pick its bones clean. The institute was in a sector of Berlin marked for later occupation by the Western Allies, and the Soviets wanted to make sure that nothing was left behind.

In the meantime, Red Army artillery pounded the center of Berlin, while assault teams worked block by block, building by building, backed up by flame-throwers, as well as antitank guns and armor firing into German strongpoints at point-blank range. The assault troops tunneled through buildings by blasting holes in walls or crept through sewers to infiltrate and compromise German positions.

The Soviets kept on creeping closer to the center of the city. If they encountered resistance in an area, they pounded it with Katyusha barrages to soften it up, turning Berlin into rubble as they went. The rubble actually helped the defenders, allowing them to quickly set up strongpoints and roadblocks that had to be dug out with steel and blood. In fact, the Germans gradually began to destroy buildings themselves to set up obstacles to the Soviets.

Many of the Volkssturm surrendered under the pressure, but hardcore Waffen SS troops often fought to the last man. About half of them weren't even Germans, instead being survivors of foreign Waffen SS units. They fought very hard, since they had signed up to fight the loathesome Bolshevik, and in the new European order of the near future, their prospects were very dim anyway. SS death squads also did what they could to brace up less motivated troops, executing on the spot anyone who seemed to be less than enthusiastic about carrying on the struggle. Any civilian flying a white flag from a window was likely to be hanged immediately. The squads were manned by junior SS officers, blindly fanatical youngsters with no real combat experience.

Such disciplinary actions were not so easy when the potential victims were well armed and perfectly willing to shoot back. Along with the Volkssturm and Hitler Youth on the lines, there were also scarred combat veterans, survivors of Army Group Vistula who had fallen back on the city. The German Army had never had much liking for the SS and the dislike had been growing

rapidly over the previous few months, since they found the SS much more willing to execute deserters, real or imagined, than to come to grips with the Red Army. German Army soldiers had little tolerance for being bullied by what amounted to overgrown Hitler Youth and were more than a match for them. Major General Walter Mummert, commander of the Muencheburg panzer division, bluntly ordered the SS to stay out of his sector, saying his troops would shoot them on sight if they didn't.

A particular focus of the Red Army's drive into Berlin was the Tempelhof airport, in the south of the city, since Stalin wanted to make sure that Hitler couldn't fly out of the trap. The defenders fought back very stubbornly, but the airfield finally fell at about midday on 26 April. Actually, if Hitler had wanted to escape, Tempelhof wasn't necessary. That same day, General Robert Ritter von Greim, the Luftwaffe commander in the Munich area, flew into Berlin with his lover, Hannah Reitsch, in a little Fiesler Storch lightplane. Greim had been ordered by the Fuehrer to come to Berlin in haste. He had been wounded by flak but Reitsch took the controls and got the aircraft in to safety.

Reitsch had completely broken the mold of the Nazi stereotype that a woman's place was in the home and gotten away with it, having become a national celebrity. She had been awarded the Iron Cross First Class and was a personal confidante of the Fuehrer. She pleaded with Hitler to fly out of the city with her in the Storch and save himself, but he said he would remain in Berlin and die there. He asked her to join him in his fate, and she agreed.

It was only a matter of time for Berlin now, as the Red Army pushed into the city. The Germans had to be crushed, building by building, block by block. Many German troops surrendered but others fought on bitterly, shooting at Soviet troops from the windows of buildings or trying to ambush Red tanks with panzerfausts. The confusion of the fighting, aggravated by Stalin's pushiness and his insistence on throwing massive forces into the battle, led to a large number of friendly-fire casualties, particularly from artillery.

Red Army battalions were ground up and destroyed in the fighting and new ones thrown in to replace them. New recruits were sent into the fight with little training, and even liberated Soviet prisoners were handed weapons and immediately put into the struggle. The Red Army was now breaking through the outer lines of Berlin's defenses, gradually pushing German forces into the core of the city around the Tiergarten, the great central park and zoo. Its eastern entrance was marked by the Brandenburg Gate. The Reichstag, the old German legislature building, was to the north of the gate, and his bunker was to the south. It was the last stand of the Third Reich.

* Elsewhere German troops were giving up the fight. The British and the Americans were now encountering little opposition, and when any was offered it was usually quickly overcome after a brief exchange of fire, some Germans being reluctant to give up without at least putting up a token show of resistance. Walter Model, in charge of Army Group B in the Ruhr, found his command disintegrating underneath him. This was too much of a catastrophe even for Model, and he shot himself on 21 April.

Ilya Ehrenberg wrote that the Germans were surrendering to the British and Americans "with fanatical persistence". Surprisingly, this comment was not mockery of the Germans but a display

of bitter resentment over the fact that the Western Allies were having a much easier war. Stalin had even specifically complained about the disparity between German resistance from East to West in a message to Roosevelt on 7 April, hinting strongly that there was double-dealing behind it -- apparently oblivious to the fact that it was the Red Army's harshness that had forced the Germans to fight like trapped animals, and completely oblivious to the fact that Red Army tactical doctrine all but encouraged excessive losses of men.

The Germans had of course done much in the USSR to provoke Red Army brutality. A Berlin teenager recollected later how he was riding in a railroad car where the passengers were bitterly cursing their lot, when a grizzled and heavily decorated veteran sitting among them loudly told all of them to shut up. The veteran explained with staggering honesty that Germans had to fight to the last: "If others win the war, and if they do to us only a fraction of what we have done in the occupied territories, there won't be a single German left in a few weeks." Still, if the Soviets made it clear they were bent on slaughter, they could not be surprised if the Germans fought back tooth and nail to the last.

Stalin had figured out the logic of the situation by that time. In mid-April Soviet propaganda had abruptly reversed its line and began to encourage good treatment of German civilians and prisoners, leaving Ehrenberg hanging in the wind -- a condition that could have a literal interpretation in the Soviet Union. The change in policy made little difference to the frontoviki, who went on conducting themselves as they had, with some asking why they didn't see articles by Ehrenberg any more. It was likely only Ehrenberg's popularity with the troops that kept him from being arrested.

In some cities in the south of the Reich, groups of Germans who had become disillusioned with Naziism, if they had ever had any sympathy for it, organized to take matters into their own hands. Rebel groups helped to hand Augsburg over to the Americans, though the rebels had less luck in Munich. The US Army entered the city only to find a miniature civil war in progress that took a few days of violence and confusion to sort out.

German units facing the Red Army around Berlin were now only fighting to escape west and surrender to the British and Americans. To the north of the city all effective resistance to the Soviets had crumbled by 27 April. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, the long-standing OKW chief of staff, paid a visit to the area and was enraged to find that German soldiers were falling back. Keitel called together Heinrici, who was trying to hold the line with Army Group Vistula, and General Hasso von Manteuffel, in command of the group's Third Panzer Army. They showed up, with several of Manteuffel's staff officers armed with submachine guns as if to suggest that an attempt to arrest their commanders might not be wise. Whether Keitel took the hint or not, he lit into Heinrici in a fury: "The Fuehrer ordered you to hold! He ordered you not to move! Yet you - you ordered the retreat!"

Heinrici, unfazed, responded that unless he got substantial reinforcements there was no possibility of conducting an effective defense -- and so he would continue his retreat. He saw no sense in throwing away the lives of his troops for nothing. Keitel was beyond any such considerations of reason, shouting back: "There are no reserves left!" -- and then ordering Manteuffel: "You will hold your positions! You will turn your army around here and now!"

Heinrici replied: "As long as I am in command, I will not issue that order to Manteuffel."

Keitel went purple and raved at Heinrici, calling him a coward and a traitor, accusing him of being weak for not being willing to execute more of his men. Heinrici finally displayed a bit of irritation: "If you want these men sent to the rear to be shot, why don't you do it?"

Keitel, too choked with rage and frustration to say more, got into his staff car and left. Heinrici was sacked that evening, for whatever difference it made. Nobody was going to stand and fight in the north. Thanks to Heinrici's sensibility in disobeying orders, about 155,000 of his troops managed to escape and surrender to the British and Americans, with 140,000 men of the German 21st Army going into captivity alongside them.

To the southeast of the city the German 9th Army and elements of the 4th Panzer Army, which had been surrounded by Zhukov and Konev's pincers, was desperately trying to break out to the west. General Theodor Busse, commander of the 9th Army, received hysterical messages from Berlin, ordering him to come to the rescue of the city. Like Wenck, Busse ignored the orders. The trapped soldiers suffered heavily from Soviet artillery and attack planes, but managed to break through the ring on 30 April. They used the last available operational tank and joined up with Wenck's 12th Army on its rescue mission. Only about 30,000 troops of the 9th and 4th Panzer, a seventh of their original strength, and about 70,000 men of the 12th Army survived to surrender to the British and Americans.

[16.1] THE DEATH OF ADOLF HITLER

* As the Red Army converged on the center of Berlin, the struggle for the city entered its final phase. Stalin wanted the battle completed by May Day, the traditional Communist holiday, regardless of the cost. As the Red Army squeezed the defenders into the Tiergarten area, life turned into a hell of explosions, destruction, and lunacy.

By that time, Hitler was close to the end of his rope. He was infuriated that day when a report came in over BBC radio that Heinrich Himmler had offered to surrender Germany to the Western Allies. Himmler was beyond the Fuehrer's reach, but he was able to capture Major General Hermann Fegelein, the SS liaison to headquarters, trying to get away in civilian clothes with his pregnant mistress. He seemed drunk and was loaded down with loot.

Fegelein was worked over by the Gestapo, revealed that he knew of Himmler's schemes, and was promptly executed. If Hitler wasn't long for this world, he could at least cram in a bit more vindictiveness in the time he had left. He felt all the more vindictive because he realized that now even the SS was deserting him. He ordered Hanna Reitsch to fly out of Berlin with General Greim, who was to arrange for the arrest of Himmler and deal with him as well.

That done, Hitler turned his attention to more pleasant matters. His mistress, Eva Braun, had always wanted to marry him, but though he had little interest in other women he had refused to do so, feeling it would have diminished his stature as a self-made Teutonic demigod. Her relationship with him was so discreet that few outside the Fuehrer's immediate circle knew she existed. She was, however, totally devoted to him. When her sister Ilse, who had fled west in front of the advancing Soviets, suggested that the Fuehrer was leading the country into an abyss, Eva angrily told Ilse that she ought to be stood up against a wall and be shot. Hitler knew that Eva wanted legitimacy badly, and as she was clearly willing to die with him even he could not deny her that when the world was falling down around him. They married that evening.

He then dictated his political testament, passing the Reich presidency and formal leadership to Doenitz, though the other prime contender for the position, Martin Bormann, was named Party Chancellor and executor of Hitler's will. This arrangement would almost certainly put Doenitz and Bormann at odds; even in his last hours, Hitler could not give up his instinct to play people off against each other. Those who had failed him, Goering and Himmler, were to be expelled from the Nazi Party.

Even Hitler acknowledged in the document that these instructions would likely be irrelevant in the order that followed him, though tiresomely true to form he ended with a blast against "international Jewry". The testament declared that Goebbels would be Reich Chancellor in the new order, but Goebbels, possibly recognizing the futility of the honor, for the first time refused to obey his Fuehrer and insisted that he would remain to the end.

* Hitler woke up on the morning of 29 April to be greeted with news of the death of Benito Mussolini and his mistress, who had been captured and shot by Italian partisans. That set the

atmosphere for the rest of the day, which was characterized by the rumble of explosions above the bunker as the Soviets closed in. All the military news was bad, and there was little doubt that the Red Army would capture the bunker in two or three days. Once again Hitler was encouraged to flee Berlin; once again he refused.

The next morning, 30 April 1945, the Red Army began a final push to capture the Reichstag, which was defended by roughly 6,000 Germans, mostly fanatical SS troops. After a thorough bombardment, the 150th Division of the Third Shock Army went in.

While the drama above ground continued, events in the Fuehrer's bunker moved on to their final conclusion. Hitler ate lunch with his two secretaries at midday while Eva Hitler gave away her belongings. In mid-afternoon, the Fuehrer and his bride committed suicide in his private quarters; he swallowed a cyanide pill and shot himself, while she relied on the cyanide pill. Witnesses were impressed by the way that she had displayed no fear to the very end, exhibiting a sort of dignity and serenity beyond the reach of her husband.

Hitler, revolted by the way the corpses of Mussolini and his mistress had been strung up in public to be abused, had given orders that he and his wife's bodies be cremated. SS officers took the corpses to the surface and tried to burn them, though they couldn't build a proper pyre to make sure the bodies were reduced to ash. One of the SS guards ran downstairs to tell a colleague: "The chief's on fire. Do you want to come and have a look?"

With Hitler dead, the occupants of the bunker began to disperse. Martin Bormann tried to flee through the battleground in the city. He was reported killed but his body was not found, and rumors would linger for decades that he had escaped and was at large. A skeleton was found in Berlin in 1972 that was identified as his, and he was declared dead by a German court in 1973.

Both the defenders and the attackers in the fight for the Reichstag had other things on their mind than the fate of Hitler and Eva Braun. It was a nasty close-quarters struggle, with German and Soviet troops fighting it out for individual rooms with submachine guns and grenades. That evening, two Soviet soldiers, Mikhail Yegorov and Meliton Kantaria, experienced fighters who had fought in partisan ranks, managed to get to the roof of the building to plant a flag at 10:50 PM, symbolically proclaiming Soviet victory in the struggle. It was as powerful a symbol of victory to the Russians as the raising of the US flag on Iwo Jima by the Marines was to the Americans.

[16.2] THE FALL OF BERLIN

* The shooting wasn't actually over at the time. The vicious fight for the Reichstag went on until sunrise the next morning, 1 May, when the surviving defenders finally gave up. In the meantime, SS troopers had blasted a hole in the wall between a subway tunnel and a neighboring canal to flood it and prevent the Soviets from using it to infiltrate German positions. The water flooded through 25 kilometers (15.5 miles) of tunnels that were full of civilians trying to hide out from the fighting.

The story has persisted that large numbers were drowned, but more detailed examinations suggest that the tunnels flooded slowly and not more than generally to waist height. Some wounded who were in the underground may have drowned, but the numbers of bodies seen floating in the water were probably casualties from other actions whose corpses just happened to be in the tunnel. There was no shortage of corpses in Berlin at the moment. The Soviets were worried that some of the Nazi brass were trying to escape at that time and Red Army forces were fighting furiously to make sure no Germans got out of the encirclement of the city.

A few hours earlier, in the small hours of the morning, German General Krebs had come across the lines under a white flag and spoken with Chuikov. Krebs tried to brass it out with Chuikov at first, saying: "Today is the first of May, a great holiday for our two nations -- "

Chuikov dryly put Krebs in his place: "*We* have a great holiday today. How things are with you over there it is less easy to say."

Krebs, brought down a notch, informed Chuikov that Hitler had committed suicide. Chuikov replied, lying through his teeth: "We know." That took Krebs back again, but he went on to ask for a cease-fire until the new Doenitz government could organize itself for a formal capitulation. Krebs was assuming that Chuikov had a level of authority that was well beyond what he actually had, and Krebs seemed to probing for a conditional capitulation when the Allies had agreed to settle for nothing less than unconditional surrender. Chuikov stalled Krebs and then phoned Zhukov to pass on the news. Zhukov then phoned Koba in turn. On hearing the news, Stalin replied: "So that's the end of the bastard. Too bad it was impossible to take him alive." Stalin, never very trusting, sent Beria to provide confirmation.

Krebs finally tired of being strung along by the impassive Chuikov and went back to the bunker that afternoon. Have reached the end of his tether, Krebs committed suicide, as did Goebbels and his entire family, with his wife Magda Goebbels feeding their six children cyanide. An ineffectual attempt was made to burn the bodies.

The following morning, 2 May, Lieutenant General Helmuth Weidling, who had been appointed commandant of Berlin a week earlier, went to Chuikov's headquarters and surrendered the city. He wrote an order to be distributed to the troops:

BEGIN QUOTE:

On 30 April, the Fuehrer to whom we all swore allegiance left us in the lurch. On command of the Fuehrer, you still believe that you must fight for Berlin, even though the lack of heavy weapons and ammunition, and the situation in general, make this battle appear senseless!

Every hour longer that you go on fighting prolongs the terrible suffering of the Berlin population and of our wounded. In agreement with the high command of the Soviet forces, I demand that you stop the battle immediately.

END QUOTE

Weidling even recorded a message for Red Army sound trucks to shout at German units that continued to fight. Many surrendered, but some others kept right on shooting. It took the Soviets two more days to completely stamp out the resistance.

* The fall of Berlin was a great triumph of the Soviet people. They had paid bitterly for it, taking 300,000 casualties. However, the survivors had reason to celebrate and time to relax for once.

For the Berliners who had survived the battle, there was no reason to celebrate. Survival was a difficult prospect, and the future beyond mere survival was grim. The Soviet troops who had been fighting on the front lines proved surprisingly kindly. One German woman who watched the "Ivans" trying to learn how to ride captured bicycles found they reassuringly reminded her of overgrown kids -- not all that bad a way to describe a conscript private. However, kids tend to have weak concepts of ethics, and one Soviet officer warned a German that those who would come later were simply "pigs". He was perfectly correct. Everything that wasn't nailed down was looted, much of what was nailed down was trashed, the women were casually raped, and Soviet officers took no great care to stop the abuses when they did not participate themselves.

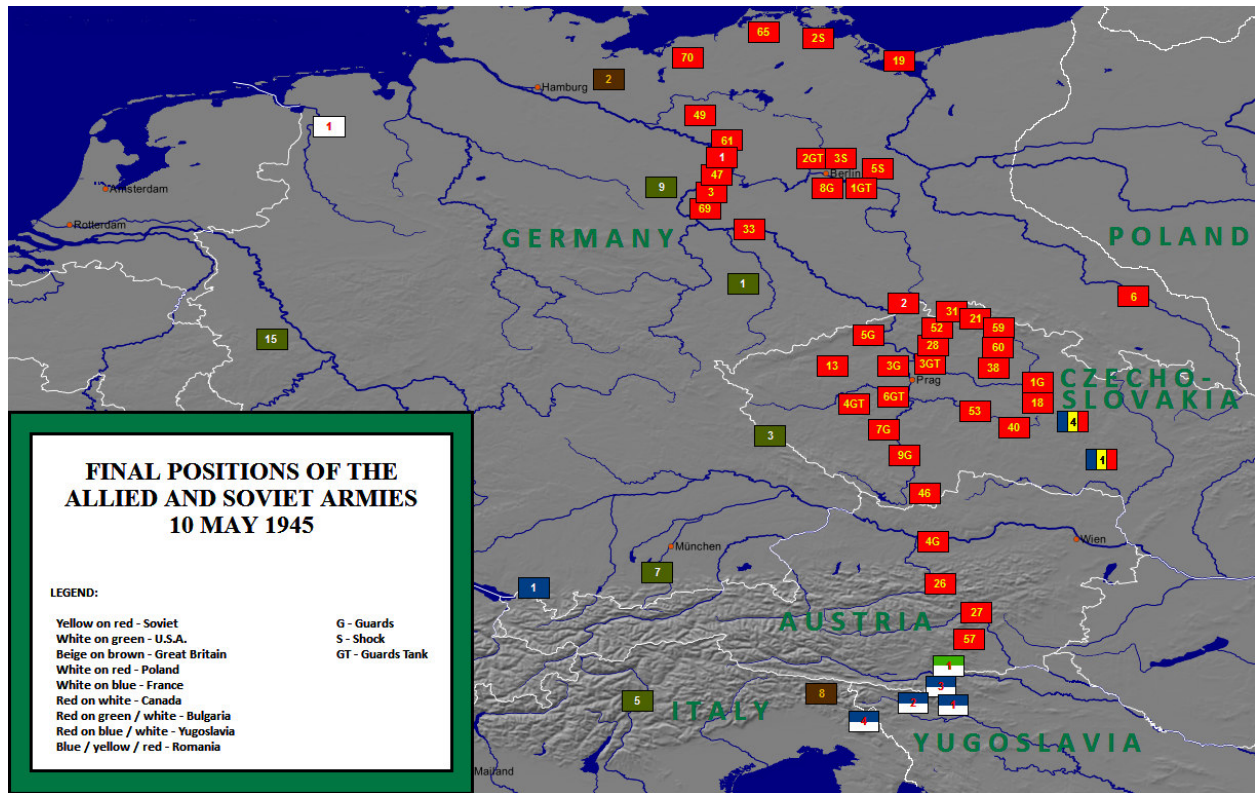
There was, astonishingly for law-abiding Germans, even looting and fighting by the citizens. Some Berliners drank themselves into temporary oblivion, others huddled up and wept, or simply sank into dull passivity.

Soviet soldiers had found the corpses of Nazi Propaganda Minister Goebbels, his wife, and their six children. The Red Army had also recovered Hitler's remains, after a false alarm from a corpse found at the Reichs Chancellery, which turned out to be one of Hitler's manservants who looked a great deal like the Fuehrer. A SMERSH team was put in charge of the matter, sending a team of sappers into the Reichs Chancellery to check for booby-traps before entering themselves. The sappers, who were more afraid of the SMERSH team than booby traps, found that the Germans hadn't left any unpleasant surprises behind.

The Soviets kept quiet about these discoveries, telling the Western Allies they had found nothing. Even Zhukov was given the cover story, and Koba, playing his nasty games, repeatedly called him up, asked if he had found Hitler's body, and then demanded action when Zhukov said no. Zhukov didn't find out about the lie for twenty years, and the story didn't get out to the West for much longer. Hitler's and Eva Braun's remains were placed in a tomb at Magdeburg in East Germany until 1970, when the KGB, under orders by Soviet leadership who did not want the remains to ever be revered as relics, crushed up the bones and scattered them over a marsh. Some fragments that were believed to be Hitler's that survived after that time turned out under examination after the end of the century to be those of a young woman.

Hitler might have cheated Stalin's wrath, but there were other things Koba wanted in Berlin. The NKVD managed to seize over two tonnes of gold from the Reichsbank, along with larger amounts of silver and piles of various currency notes, but the take there was disappointing. Most of the gold had been moved West to fall into the hands of the Western Allies.

[16.3] GERMANY SURRENDERS



* The end of fighting in Berlin didn't quite end the war. The new Doenitz government sent emissaries to the British and Americans, with Doenitz clinging to the absurd hope that the Western Allies would betray the Soviets and make a deal with the Germans to present a common front against Bolshevism. He received in reply a brief, concise document that spelled out precisely what the Allies meant by "unconditional surrender", along with a demand that it be signed immediately. Doenitz thought it over and resentfully caved in. The articles of surrender were signed in France by General Alfred Jodl on 7 May and went into effect on the evening of 8 May.

This was actually a preliminary document, with the Germans to sign a more formal document later. It led to a round of tedious bickerings over protocol and precedence between the British and Americans, the Soviets, and the French, but in the end everyone wanted the Germans to surrender, and the suspicions and irritations over touchy pride were set aside. The Germans formally surrendered just after midnight on 9 May 1945. Zhukov led the Allied team at the surrender ceremony. Zhukov danced at the celebration afterward, though not before the cameramen had been prudently asked to leave.

A formal surrender was a fine thing, since there was a German army of 100,000 men in Norway that had been ready and able to carry on the battle, but even that wasn't quite the last word. Germans units in the East continued to go on fighting in desperate attempts to stay out of Soviet hands. There was a short-lived squabble over the Danish island of Bornholm in the Baltic, where

the German commander considered himself still at war with the USSR and fired on Soviet aircraft. After two days of air attacks, the Red Army landed a contingent of shock troops on the island and forced the Germans to surrender. It was the final real battle of the European war.

There had been nasty fighting in Prague as local partisans, assisted by elements of General Andrei Vlasov's ROA force, rose up against the Germans. The troops of the ROA faced a dim future and they turned against their masters in hope of improving their standing. They soon were informed by Communist Czech partisan leaders that the ROA was still regarded as the enemy, and so on 9 May the ROA troops fled west along with German troops in hopes of finding sanctuary with the Americans. Left in control of Prague, the Czechs engaged in brutal reprisals against German civilians left among them. German women had their heads shaved and were gang-raped in public. German mothers were bound to their children with barbed wire and thrown in the Vltava (Moldau) River to drown; tens of thousands of corpses were pulled out of the water downstream.

As for the ROA, the Americans were not quite sure what to do with them. Some American officers suggested that the troops disperse and make their own way west, and many did. Vlasov, however, was arrested by the Americans and then grabbed by the Soviets. He and 11 other ROA officers were hanged in 1946.

About 175,000 Germans surrendered in Yugoslavia, with about half of them to die of ill-treatment in captivity. Elsewhere, in French coastal towns still under German control, in Norway, in Denmark, the surrenders went more peacefully. A picture taken on 17 May in Denmark shows German troops tossing their weapons onto the back of the flatbed truck and appearing perfectly cheerful over the whole thing.

[16.4] RESTORING ORDER

* With the shooting finally over, it was time to get Germany in order again. There were certain issues to deal with. Generals such as Kesselring and Keitel who were suspected of war crimes were arrested. Himmler was captured by the British but, having a good idea of his chances if he went on trial, committed suicide by taking cyanide.

The Doenitz government, holed up in Flensburg on the coast, was allowed to operate for the moment until the Allies figured out what to do next. Stalin suspected that even this limited acceptance of the Doenitz government hinted that the Western Allies were trying to strike a deal with the Nazis to sell out the USSR, and the Soviet government protested loudly.

The Soviets were in a particularly foul mood. Not long before his death, Roosevelt had decided that Stalin was completely untrustworthy, and the new US president, Harry Truman, took a very hard line with the Soviets. On 8 May Truman canceled Lend-Lease aid to the USSR. Technically he had every right to do so, since the terms of Lend-Lease specified that it would be terminated at the end of the war in Europe, but Truman did absolutely nothing to soften the blow.

However, even newspapers in the US were indignant over the existence of the rump Nazi regime, asking why all senior German officials hadn't been rounded up. On 23 May, British troops swept in and arrested the Doenitz government, subjecting them to humiliatingly thorough searches to make sure they weren't concealing weapons or cyanide capsules. The Third Reich was history.

* With the fighting fading out, the Red Army did try to impose order on Berlin. The troops were told in indoctrination sessions to improve their behavior and the rapes and looting began to die down, if slowly. Soviet troops would still try to order Germans to hand over their watches at gunpoint, only to be told: "Watch already surrender!" Rape became much less necessary when German women, faced not only with their own starvation but that of their children, could be bought simply with a promise of some food. Soviet troops found that stable sexual relationships had homely charms of their own and acquired "occupation wives", a practice that enraged their real wives back in the USSR when the news filtered home.

The Soviets had half expected the Germans would mount a partisan campaign against the Red Army, much like the savage guerrilla war that Soviet partisans had conducted against the Germans. In October 1944, the Nazis had in fact created an underground resistance movement, the "Werewolves", to carry on the struggle. After the surrender, the Werewolves performed a few acts of terror, but there had never been much enthusiasm for the exercise and the Werewolves were quickly suppressed. Former SS officers did, however, form a shadowy organization known as "Odessa" that would linger on for decades and be suspected of various acts of terror around the world.

Resistance was far more the exception than the rule. Once things settled down, the Germans proved to be model subjects, one Soviet marveling at their "docility and discipline". The Germans were sick of war; Naziism had been proven a bust; and traditional German respect for law, authority, and order worked against the spirit of terrorism. In fact, Berliners even converted old Nazi flags into Communist banners, a transformation of attitude that some jokers among them characterized as "Heil Stalin!"

Colonel General Nikolai Berzarin was now the formal commandant of Berlin. He was a very conscientious man, trying to keep Berliners fed and restore the city to working order, and even dropping into messhalls to casually chat with the citizenry. He would be later killed in a completely idiotic traffic accident and Berliners would mourn him, with rumors floating around that Berzarin had actually been murdered by the NKVD.

Worse would follow Berzarin. A German Communist named Walter Ulbricht, who had spent much of the war in the Soviet Union, was already on the scene, acting as Stalin's unquestioning servant. Eventually Ulbricht would rise to the head of the Red East German regime established by the Soviets. Ulbricht was a master denouncer, and appallingly even Beria, a backstabber on a grand scale, called him a "scoundrel capable of killing his father and mother." The East Germans would build up a formidable internal security apparatus, the Stasi, acquiring much of its unpleasant capability from ex-Gestapo men, working under new management.

[16.5] DAY OF RECKONING

* As the new order emerged in a divided Germany, there remained the question of what to do with the leadership of the old order, now behind bars. British and American interrogators found that senior Wehrmacht officers tried to place all the blame for the crimes of the Reich on the Nazis and the SS. The officers tried to present themselves as simply misunderstood -- victims of bad decisions and unfortunate circumstances.

The record clearly showed that German generals had been happy enough to go along with Hitler's agenda when he was winning, turning a blind eye to the crimes of the regimes at best and aiding in them at worst, and had only turned against him when he started to lose. The interrogators, assembling the big picture from various remarks and readings between the lines, were appalled to find that the generals unconsciously but clearly said as much. It was a performance along the lines of that of a gang of bank robbers in jail going on about the stupid things they had done that got them caught, and never giving a moment's thought that maybe they shouldn't have been robbing banks in the first place.

Of the innermost Nazi circle, only Goering had been captured alive at the end of the war, Hitler, Goebbels, and Himmler all having committed suicide. Rudolf Hess was already in captivity, due to his mad attempt to negotiate with the British in 1940. On 18 October 1945, a formal indictment was brought against 24 leaders of the old regime, including Goering and Hess, not to mention Ribbentrop, Rosenberg, and Keitel. The trial began in Nuremberg on 20 November.

The Nuremberg trials were unarguably one of the greatest legal shows in history. They were an opportunity not only to try the Nazi leadership, but also the regime itself and make its crimes apparent. The sentences were passed down on 30 September and 1 October 1946. Twelve of the defendants were sentenced to hang, while seven more were given prison terms, and three were acquitted. The condemned were executed on 16 October. Of course Goering had been sentenced to die, but he committed suicide by drinking poison just a few hours before he was to go to the gallows. Keitel was hanged, probably to the satisfaction of Wehrmacht veterans who regarded him as the "gravedigger" of the German Army.

Somewhat surprisingly, Ribbentrop and Rosenberg were executed as well, despite the fact that Ribbentrop had been regarded by most as an incompetent and Rosenberg was clearly ineffectual. There would be further trials of Nazi officials and officers, some as late as the 1990s. Erich Koch was handed over to the Poles, but for whatever reason they decided not to execute him despite his enthusiasm for brutalities.

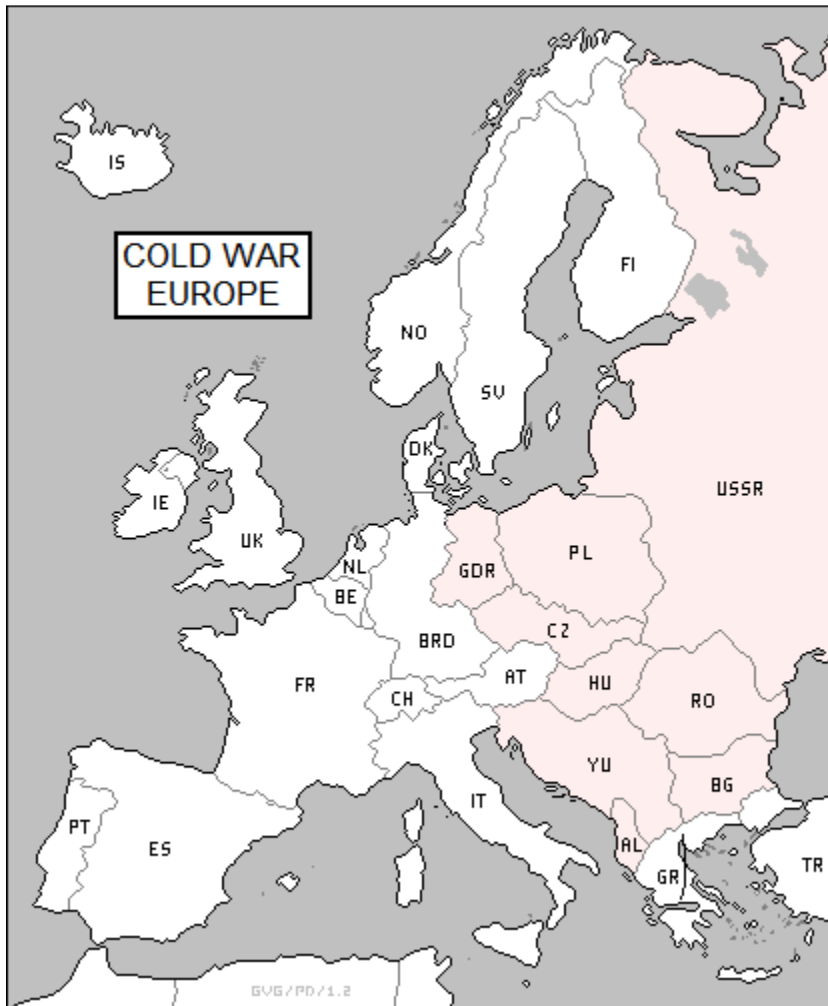
The trials brought senior Nazi leadership to the dock and found them wanting, but it is now generally seen that the net was loose. The Wehrmacht had widespread complicity in war crimes, and much of German civilian society was tainted by the slave labor system that had supported the Reich. It was simply not possible to bring every German or even most Germans who had committed crimes to justice; not only would it have required a massive effort, it would have led to trying to run a society where the number of people imprisoned rivaled the number left free. Still, although unreformed German Nazis and denialists linger even today, the mainstream of

German society would come to see the era of devotion to Hitler, authoritarian rule, and military aggression as a black period in the nation's history.

[17.0] The Iron Curtain Falls

v1.2.0 / chapter 17 of 17 / 01 feb 10 / greg goebel / public domain

* Hitler had foreseen correctly that the Soviets and the Western allies would have a falling-out and become enemies, but it happened much too late to do him any good. As the hot war against the Nazis faded away, the cold war between East and West began to take root. In the meantime Stalin, the distraction of crushing Hitler having ended, turned his attention back to the interrupted war against his own people.



[17.1] STALIN'S PEACE

* All Soviet citizens celebrated the new peace, even those in the Gulag, though the celebrations there were more mandatory than spontaneous. However, in Stalin's USSR, "peace" was a strictly relative term. Stalin had been forced to relax his grip to deal with Hitler. Now that Hitler was history, Stalin could tighten it again.

There was, for example, the troublesome matter of the overly popular and independent Zhukov. In his press conference with international reporters after the fall of Berlin, Zhukov made no mention of Stalin until queried by reporters. It is unlikely that this was the straw that broke Stalin's back, but it could not have made Stalin feel any better about Zhukov. Koba could also not have been happy with the admiration that Zhukov was being given in the British and American press. Stalin might call Zhukov his Suvorov, but listening to others do it was irritating.

Beria sent his lieutenant Viktor Abakumov, head of SMERSH, to Germany to arrest anyone who might be able to discredit Zhukov. Zhukov unsurprisingly found out and bluntly gave Abakumov the choice of immediately going back home under his own power or being escorted there by Zhukov's soldiers. Beria, infuriated, then moved to more direct action, having some of Zhukov's aides arrested and tortured to give false testimony against their commander. They testified in fine Stalinist tradition that Zhukov was plotting against the Great Leader, and that Zhukov had established secret contacts with American General Eisenhower.

Zhukov's friendly relationship with the folksy and amiable Eisenhower was in fact obvious. Eisenhower visited Moscow in August 1945, with Zhukov acting as his escort, with the two generals greeted by roaring applause wherever they went. Eisenhower even put his arm around Zhukov's shoulder. To Stalin's mind, this was all more or less treason in itself, though Koba himself was agreeable to Eisenhower, apologizing to the visitor for the "last minute change in plans" when the Red Army moved on Berlin instead of Central Europe.

Imprisoning or executing Zhukov was not prudent; after all, he was one of the heroes of the day. Zhukov was granted the honor of leading a victory parade in Moscow on 24 June 1945, romantically galloping in front of the troops on a gray charger, though the celebration was dampened by downpours of rain. Stalin's son Vasily told Zhukov that Stalin had wanted to perform the ride himself, but the horse had thrown him when he tried to get the hang of riding it, and so Koba decided to let Zhukov ride instead.

Zhukov could be put out of the way in a subtler fashion. At the end of 1945, he was denounced, demoted, and assigned to military bureaucratic oblivion, given meaningless posts in Odessa and the Urals. He would not be rehabilitated until after Stalin's death. Less prominent generals got worse treatment, with dozens arrested. Air Marshal Novikov was broken in rank, stripped of his decorations, and sent to prison. General Telyagin, Zhukov's executor in the conquest of Berlin, complained about looting by NKVD formations, and so Beria saw to it that Telyagin was sent to prison for 25 years. These men, too, would have to wait for Stalin's death to end their punishments.

* Germany was divided into separate zones of control, each administered by one of the victorious nations, and Berlin, deep in the Soviet zone of control, was split up similarly. Berliners were starving. Soviet citizens were going hungry at the time as well, but Stalin understood the need to maintain his image of benevolence, and priority was given to sending subsistence rations to Berlin. Special newsreels were put together displaying young children who had been separated from their parents, and shown to German citizens in hopes of reuniting families.

Those children from the East who had been taken away by the Germans were returned home, though in many cases there was little but ruins waiting for them. They carried with them identification numbers tattooed upon them by the Germans, and also the stigma of having been, however involuntarily and innocently, exposed to foreign infection. In Stalin's Soviet Union, that was crime enough.

Red Army prisoners of the Germans, and the Soviet citizens who had been carted off for Nazi slave labor, were also objects of suspicion. Even those prisoners who had been given weapons and thrown back into the fight against the Germans immediately after being freed from camps got little credit for it. The prisoners and slave laborers had looked forward to liberation, only to find themselves regarded with contempt by Red Army troops, who abused them, robbed them, and even raped the women, calling them "whores of the Germans".

That was almost the least of their worries. The NKVD set up a hundred holding camps where returnees could be held and interrogated. If the interrogators didn't like the answers they got -- and they were inclined to not like them no matter what they were -- the victim was going to suffer. Stalin invoked his agreements with the Western Allies to ensure that Soviet citizens and prisoners who had fallen into their hands were returned to the security of their own homeland.

The Allies returned the Hiwis, Soviet subjects who had fought against Stalin. General Krasnoff, Ottoman of the Don Cossacks, had fought against Bolshevism since 1918, and during the war led an army of 70,000 Cossacks to fight alongside Hitler's forces. At the end of the war, Krasnoff and his surviving Cossacks surrendered to the British. The British promised not to turn them over to Stalin, but Stalin insisted. The British packed up the Cossacks, who in some cases were accompanied by their families, and took them to a bridge.

The NKVD was waiting for them on the other side. The prisoners were ordered to walk across the bridge. The officers were shot immediately by the NKVD in full view of the British. Some of the Cossacks threw themselves off the bridge, which was about a hundred meters above the river. Those who had not been shot or committed suicide were packed into a train and hauled away. Most were not executed, but they would have a very hard time of it in the Gulag.

* While the trains took traitors, both suspected and real, eastward into the far-flung network of the prison camps, a train took Stalin west to meet with the other Allied leaders at Potsdam. Beria was entrusted to ensure Stalin's safety and paved the way with a massive security operation, with 17,000 troops guarding the rail route. Stalin did not believe in taking unnecessary chances.

At Potsdam, he was at the peak of his powers, meeting with the new Western leaders, US President Harry Truman and British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, who replaced Churchill even as the conference was in progress. The demilitarized status of Germany was clarified, as were the different occupation zones of the victorious Allies. The matter of resettling six million ethnic Germans who had been evicted from Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, in general in an abrupt and harsh manner, was addressed. Hitler had made a great deal of noise about the status of German-speaking minorities in Eastern Europe, and now the problem was being solved in a way he had not quite anticipated. The Allies handed Stalin a plum by recognizing the Communist Lublin government as the legitimate government of Poland. Soviet control over the rest of Eastern Europe was not challenged.

Truman pressed Stalin to help deal with the Japanese, and he was agreeable, saying planning was already in motion. The Soviet Union would move against Japan in mid-August. That was satisfying to Truman, but he was puzzled when he dropped hints to Stalin that the US had developed a powerful new weapon -- the first atomic bomb had just been tested -- and Stalin seemed completely disinterested. Actually, the development organization had been thoroughly infiltrated by Red spies; Truman hadn't been briefed on the program until after Roosevelt's death, while Stalin had known about the Bomb in detail long before Truman even knew it existed.

Stalin left Potsdam with considerable cause for satisfaction, though neither Truman nor Attlee seemed anywhere near as agreeable with Stalin as their predecessors had been. It was all but the last act between the two sides where they resembled allies. With Hitler dead and the borders with the West clarified, Stalin was once more the master of his own realm. His power was greater than that of the Tsars. He was, whatever his title, truly the greatest Tsar that Russia ever knew.

* The Japanese had been very careful not to provoke Stalin while he fought Hitler, but with Hitler taken care of, Stalin could send the mighty Red Army east to the Manchurian border to take advantage of the weakness of the Japanese, who were clinging on desperately under terrible blows from the Americans. Stalin had planned to move in mid-August, but on 8 August 1945 the Americans dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Fearing that the war against Japan would be over before the USSR could claim spoils in the Far East, Stalin ordered the offensive to jump off that same day.

The Soviet juggernaut rolled over the poorly equipped and supplied Japanese forces in front of them. Stalin hoped to make great gains and planned to invade the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido. The Americans dropped a second bomb on Nagasaki a few days later. The war was soon over, and Stalin's invasion of the Japanese home islands became another incident in a history that never happened. He did make sure he collected on the deal he had made, acquiring South Sakhalin, the Kuriles, Port Arthur, and Dairen for the Soviet Union. These had been Tsarist possessions, lost in the Russo-Japanese war forty years earlier. The new Communist Tsar wanted them back.

The American use of the Bomb impressed on Stalin that the weapon had lived up to its fearsome potential. Stalin could no longer threaten the West with brute force, since the West could defeat him at that game. He turned his attention to the reconstruction of his country, as well as imposing his ideas of order on the population.

[17.2] RECONSTRUCTION & REPRESSION

* Stalin's satisfaction with the results of the war was limited by the fact that it had left much of his kingdom in ruins. Over 2,000 towns in the Ukraine and western Russia had been damaged or all but demolished, and countless villages had been burned to the ground. Over 25 million Soviet subjects were homeless. People threw together hovels, dugouts, and shanties to provide shelter while they picked over the ruins to see what could be salvaged. Plows were drawn by women and old men.

Despite the destruction, there was some spirit of optimism among the tough Soviet people. They had survived the worst that the Fascists could throw at them. They would work and rebuild, believing that the better and freer society that Communism had been promising them for a generation was at hand. They were mistaken. State propaganda had been encouraging such delusions, but Stalin was merely waving a carrot he had no intention of actually handing over. Stalin never considered whether the people deserved to be rewarded for their sacrifices. He was only concerned that the people remained under his control, and remained free of contamination by foreign influences. The people's welfare and prosperity were secondary considerations at best.

The story of the million-plus German prisoners in Soviet custody gives a strange flavor of Stalin's thinking. The Germans were kept in their own system of camps, isolated from the Gulag that reduced millions of Soviet citizens to lives of misery. Soviet prisoners would not be exposed to foreign ideas, particularly those of a hated enemy. Ironically, the Germans received somewhat better treatment than Soviet prisoners, though that was a very low standard of comparison. The Germans were allowed to wear their own uniforms, to write letters home, and were even bossed by their own NCOs and officers. To be sure, this last measure was also a concession to efficiency, since the German Army organization retained a formidable capability to get things done even when it was on a chain, as the Americans had found out in their own prisoner of war camps. However, there was also something of a propaganda or persuasive agenda. German officers and men went through Marxist indoctrination and those that seemed embittered in their own cause or otherwise susceptible to the Communist message were cultivated. Once sent back home, they might be valuable resources for the USSR. Those Germans who were convicted of war crimes were publicly hanged. Those that survived were finally sent home beginning in 1949, though full repatriation took five years.

Soviet citizens who had been exposed to outside influences were "quarantined". A young Soviet woman named Olga Simonova had made the mistake of falling in love with a French captain, a pilot in the famed Normandie-Niemen air regiment. The Normandie-Niemen fought in the ranks of the Red Air Force, in Soviet Yak fighters, and their pilots received Soviet decorations such as Hero of the Soviet Union. All that didn't matter: they were still foreigners and suspect, as was anyone who had any close contact with them.

Olga Simonova was dragged out of her bed by an NKVD major and a plainclothesman and sent off to prison. She and the other women incarcerated with her were all processed by men who treated them like so many cattle to degrade them and break their spirit. She objected and raised a

fuss, accidentally bruising a guard, who knocked her down and kicked her to a pulp. The doctor who tended her told her to tell no one about it if she wished to remain safe. She spent almost ten years in the Gulag, shifted from camp to camp. Some camps were better than others, but conditions in all were appalling. The guards did what they liked with the women. Many of the prisoners died.

There were lunacies within the lunacies. Even in Stalin's USSR, there were still some faint glimmerings of judicial process, and the NKVD received complaints from the judges about the flimsiness of charges against Soviet citizens. The NKVD was perfectly capable of fabricating much better cases and did so. According to some Russian historians, they established fake Soviet and fake Manchurian border camps, with NKVD prisoners of Chinese origin pretending to be the staff of the fake Manchurian border camp. The NKVD's clueless victims would be taken to the fake Soviet border camp and there told they were to go into "Manchuria" and spy for the USSR. Of course, once sent out, they were immediately captured by the "Manchurians", forced to agree to work for the Nationalist Chinese, and sent back, where they were once again captured and charged with treason. Most were shot.

* Not everyone submitted to resurgent Soviet power without a struggle. The Baltic states had now changed hands again, and Stalin renewed his efforts to erase their national identities. Many of the citizens there, and in other regions where the fighting had been intense and loyalty to Stalin doubtful in the first place, had fought as partisans against one side or both sides, and were still willing to keep up the fight.

The Baltic states did not have the rugged terrain that would permit a small guerrilla force to resist a large army. NKVD troops quickly crushed resistance, hunting down guerrilla bands and throwing anyone suspected of guerrilla sympathies into the Gulag. In the western Ukraine, Bandera's nationalist forces were able to fight from forest strongholds for a number of years before they were finally suppressed.

The misery was compounded when the summer of 1946 brought drought and crop failure to the Ukraine and southern Russia. The Soviet Union, a world power, could not feed its people.

The peasantry worked the land and were effectively even chained to the land by internal passports, but no longer owned the land. Indeed, even casually plucking an ear of grain and eating its kernels could get them a sentence to the labor camps. Their lives were controlled by Stalin and the local bosses, the mini-Stalins, who gave them orders and dealt out punishments. The local bosses were responsible for living up to the quotas established in the current Party plans, and if they did not meet them, they stood a good chance of being severely punished themselves.

Through all this suffering, Stalin kept the propaganda machine running in high gear. Films praised life under the new order, and public spectacles glorified Stalin and Soviet society in his image. Voting campaigns were scrupulously carried out, even though they provided no real choices to the voters. Newreels showed Stalin casting his vote like any good Soviet citizen, with Stalin joking a little with the cameraman. Other high Soviet officials like Molotov cast their

votes in front of the cameraman, too, but few really believed it was an act of free expression. Molotov's own wife Polina was in the Gulag, having been arrested in 1948.

[17.3] THE COLD WAR BEGINS / DEATH OF STALIN

* In a speech on 5 March 1946 at Fulton University in Missouri, USA, Winston Churchill summed up the new reality between the Soviet Union and the West in another one of his memorable phrases: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an Iron Curtain has descended across the face of Europe." The Cold War had now been formally declared.

In early 1948 Communists took over the government in Czechoslovakia, and then in June 1948 Stalin cut off access to Berlin. The Americans and their allies responded with a magnificently organized airlift to keep the city supplied, presenting Stalin with the choice of either escalating the confrontation by shooting down the aircraft, or backing down. In May 1949, he decided to back down. The West had demonstrated more spine than he expected, and the airlift was a demonstration of material strength that the USSR couldn't match.

The main effect of these provocations was to reinforce American commitment to Europe, leading to the formation of NATO in 1949. The Americans had expected that peace would allow them to return home, disarm, and tend to their own business, as they had after World War I, but Stalin ensured that the long custom of American isolationism was a thing of the past. The US Marshall Plan, introduced in 1947, was helping stabilize the states of Western Europe in the face of the Soviet threat.

In 1949, a civil war in Greece finally ended, with Soviet-backed Communists decisively defeated. Yugoslavia, though a Communist state under Josip Broz Tito, demonstrated an assertive independence of Moscow that infuriated Stalin. Koba hated Tito as much as he had hated Trotsky and tried to have him assassinated, but the clumsy attempts failed and only reinforced Yugoslav independence. The Iron Curtain had reached the limits of its extent in Europe.

* Stalin was still working hard to meet challenges from the West. On 25 September 1949 the USSR exploded their first atomic bomb, which was a straight copy of the American "Fat Man" device that had smashed Nagasaki. It had been built as a top-priority project by a massive and secret project -- Operation ENORMOZ -- under the control of Beria. The USSR, lacking a good long-range bomber to deliver the bomb, had also obtained three Boeing B-29 Superfortress bombers, which had been damaged in raids over Japan, with the American crews seeking refuge in Siberia. To their surprise, the crews were interned, and the aircraft were spirited off to be exactly disassembled, reverse-engineered, and then manufactured as the Tupolev Tu-4.

The Soviets tried to keep the nuclear test a secret, but the Americans had just begun flying Superfortresses with atmospheric sampling gear to detect the radioactive traces of such explosions. The Americans were shocked since they had not believed the backwards Soviets were capable of such a feat. Stalin was shocked that he had been found out so fast.

The Soviet Bomb was Joseph Stalin's 70th birthday gift. His birthday was celebrated across the land, with the usual adoring speeches and the applause of audiences who clapped almost indefinitely, none wishing to be the first to stop. At the celebrations, a visitor from China, Mao Tse-Tung, sat at Stalin's side. Two months earlier, Mao had finally evicted Nationalist Chinese forces from the mainland, and China had become a Communist state, providing a nearly simultaneous second blow to the confidence of the West. This was a great victory for Stalin -- though the Red revolution in China would prove less of a benefit to the Soviet state than most in East or West assumed.

At the celebrations, Mao and Kim Il Sung of North Korea pressed Stalin for his approval for an attack on South Korea. With opportunities for Communist expansion elsewhere blocked, Stalin cautiously agreed. Soviet pilots were covertly sent to fly MiG-15 jet fighters against American aircraft. The Communists got the worst of it in the air, and the Americans reacted with surprising strength and determination on the ground after initial bungling. Still, the Americans were bogged down by the fighting, and Stalin wanted to protract the struggle indefinitely in hopes of wearing the Americans down.

However, Stalin was careful to keep the fighting limited. The Soviet Union did not have the atomic capability to match the Americans at that time. Instead, Stalin challenged the West with his rhetoric, charging them with tyranny and claiming that the Soviet Union carried the banner of democratic freedoms. With his other face, he lashed out at Voroshilov, Molotov, and Mikoyan at a dinner, calling them British spies. A hush fell across the room.

Kruschev claimed in his memoirs that late in the war, Stalin had started to become "not quite right in the head." Since Stalin clearly had never been quite right in the head by any civilized standard, the implication that he had become worse was terrifying. The overwhelming pressures of war had forced reality on Stalin for a time, but when Soviet victory became certain, he began to slip back into his brutal delusions at an accelerating pace. He was getting old and was not healthy-looking, and his mindset became increasingly suspicious and arbitrary. In 1951, he mentioned, idly as if nobody in particular was around: "I'm finished, I trust no one, not even myself."

The scientists and artists went through the motions of praise for the Great Leader, but that did not save them from denunciation. Beria and Zhdanov began the witch hunt against the intelligentsia, locking up famous poets, singers, and movie stars. Another witch hunt was begun against the medical profession, particularly against the Jewish doctors who served the Kremlin. The eminent specialist Vinogradov and others were arrested, and forced to sign phony confessions that they had plotted to poison members of the government.

Even in a land where people's concepts of truth had been so totally corrupted, nobody believed it. What they believed, with plenty of justification, that a new wave of major purges was brewing that might exceed the brutality and madness of those of the 1930s. The Jews were apparently being lined up as the primary victims, Stalin apparently having found Hitler's attempt at a "final solution" of the "Jewish problem" appealing. Of course, the purge wouldn't stop at Jews. Everyone, no matter what their rank or ethnic background, was terrified.

* On 1 March 1953, Stalin failed to emerge from his apartment, and that evening the guards finally built up the courage to break in. They found him lying on a sofa, conscious but unable to speak. He appeared to have suffered a stroke. Beria and other officials arrived on 2 March, with Beria making dire threats against the doctors who were trying to tend to the fallen Stalin, but there was nothing the doctors could do. In fact, it is strongly suspected that Beria delayed obtaining care for as long as possible, though no doubt the threat to the doctors was still perfectly sincere.

Stalin's son Vasily and daughter Svetlana also came on 2 March. They had not been close to their father for some time. Both had unsettled personal lives, jumping from one broken relationship to the next. Vasily was nothing like his half-brother Yakov; Vasily was an alcoholic who had been promoted to major general of the Red Air Force by officers who feared annoying Stalin, though there was no evidence Stalin paid much attention to Vasily one way or another. Svetlana had hardly seen her father since 1943, when one of her lovers, who had the bad luck to be Jewish and so a target of suspicion by the antisemitic Stalin, had been arrested and thrown into the Gulag. She had protested to her father, who flew into a rage and slapped her twice. When she did see Stalin after that, she was a wreck for days afterward.

Vasily was characteristically drunk when he came to visit his stricken parent, raising a fuss and accusing the doctors of trying to kill his father, and was finally told to leave. Vasily would soon find himself dismissed from his high position, struggling along as a nonperson under a new name until he died in 1962 at age 41.

Svetlana stayed with her father. Stalin lingered for three more days, finally dying on 5 March 1953. Towards the end, his breathing became more labored and increasingly difficult and he turned blue as he slowly choked to death. Svetlana recorded his last acts, saying "he opened his eyes and cast a glance over everyone in the room. It was a terrible glance, insane or perhaps angry, and full of fear of death."

Then "he suddenly lifted up his left hand as though he were pointing to something up above and bringing down a curse on all. The gesture was incomprehensible and full of menace." He stilled and in time stopped breathing. Beria would succeed him for a short time, only to be arrested and shot. He had terrorized too many people and made too many enemies. The generals had a score to settle with him, and not only did Zhukov lead the party that arrested Beria after luring him out from under his security umbrella, but a Soviet general pulled the trigger that ended his sordid career.

Kruschev took Beria's place and would begin denunciations of Stalin, trying to reform the clumsy and ugly structure Stalin had created, if with very mixed results. Kruschev could never decide if he was coming or going, having been a party to the terror in Stalin's time and then repudiating it after Stalin was gone; condemning Stalin's ways while still remaining in awe of him; trying to liberalize and then reflexively cracking down when things threatened to go out of control.

That was later. Hearing of Stalin's death, many citizens wept. Of all the monstrosities of Stalin's life, the most appalling was that state propaganda had convinced the people who he had misled,

in every sense of the word, sadistically terrorized, tortured, and murdered, to love him. One Soviet citizen later said that when Stalin talked on the radio, it was "like listening to the voice of God." A woman recounted how after hearing the news of Stalin's death, she asked her fiance: "How are we going to live? It's impossible without him!"

Not everybody had been taken in. He fiance replied: "Peacefully." She commented later: "He was smarter than I was." Even in death, Stalin proved malevolent, with the crowds lining the streets of Moscow for his funeral becoming so packed that about a hundred people died in the crush. He would cast a long shadow after that. The days of lunatic mass terror quickly ended, but the state would remain authoritarian, xenophobic, fossilized, and inefficient, gradually running out of steam until it finally ground to a halt and fell apart into a rusty heap of scrap almost forty years later.

[17.4] COMMENTS, SOURCES, & REVISION HISTORY

* This document began as a set of notes taken from a historical documentary series named RUSSIA'S WAR: BLOOD UPON THE SNOW, shown on the US PBS television broadcasting network in the late 1990s. The series was directed by Viktor Lisakovitch, and detailed the reign of Joseph Stalin and in particular his war with Hitler.

This series was very good, but really just provided a basic skeleton to be filled out from print sources. The second pass on the document was based on readings from the relevant volumes of the extensive TIME-LIFE series on World War II. The following sources contributed to the final pass:

- STALIN: BREAKER OF NATIONS by Robert Conquest, Viking / Penguin 1991
- STALINGRAD / THE FATEFUL SIEGE: 1942:1943 by Anthony Beevor, Viking, 1998
- THE FALL OF BERLIN 1945 by Anthony Beevor, Viking, 2002
- KOBAN THE DREAD by Martin Amis, Hyperion, 2002
- IVAN'S WAR by Catherine Merridale, Metropolitan Books, 2006

* Revision history:

v1.0.0 / 01 apr 06 / gvg
v1.0.1 / 01 mar 08 / Minor cosmetic update.
v1.2.0 / 01 feb 10 / Added more on Allied coalition politics.

* Revision history (other):

vScribd 1.0 / 05 feb 11 / wbw / Add USMA maps